



THE
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VALE!

THE saddest word known to our tongue, though it be a blessing in brief, is 'Good-bye;' and we have all to say it. There must be pathos indeed about it, since, in my case at least, it moves that synonym for hardness, the heart of an Editor. For more than half my life I have followed that detested calling, and shall perhaps after all die in my bed. It is superfluous to assassinate a tyrant, however hateful, after his abdication. In the thirteen years, however, that I have been privileged to conduct THE CORNHILL, there have been many halcyon days when the Rejected Contributor has abstained from menace and even from complaint. I only wish to state what will be believed, but on some occasions he has actually acknowledged I was right to decline his lucubrations. Now that my little bouts with him are over, I confess that I have a tenderness for him. What patience (up to a certain point) does he exhibit; what amazing perseverance, what hoping against hope, until despair sets in and he perceives that the return of his MSS. from all quarters of the globe indicates a universal editorial conspiracy! It is then that he becomes dangerous—a matter, however, which no longer concerns me, but my esteemed successor. I am speaking, of course, only of the Rejected Contributor whose contributions are never accepted, and never will be. The member of every other profession sooner or later finds that he is unfitted for it—a square man in a round hole—and if it be possible he gets out of it; but he who thinks he has 'a calling' for Literature remains in that delusion for ever. I have known a man, who could get nothing printed in his lifetime, compose the epitaph to

be engraved on his tombstone, and leave the money for that purpose. It might not have been publication, but it was a permanent record of his literary gift.

The R. C.'s position is a truly pathetic one, and I am thankful to think that, though I have been unable to comply with his requests, I have been as gentle with him, where it was possible, as though I were fanning a sleeping Venus. It was not always possible. When he demands admittance, for example, on the ground that his wife's sister married our second cousin, one is obliged to tell him that one's literary judgment cannot be interfered with by the ties of blood. Even when he states, as the stage direction says, 'with meaning,' that his aunt is a duchess, we can only say we cannot help it, and that she can't help *him*. He is most irritating when he flatters himself he is combining modesty with conciliation, and tells us that though his contribution may not be of a first-class character, he thinks, without vanity, that 'it is at least superior to most of the productions he has seen in our respected periodical.' He may be injudicious, but he is seldom cantankerous, and I doubt if at the bottom of his heart he really believes that his disappointments are caused by malignity. I am well aware that I am henceforth of absolutely no account with him; a Lord Mayor after his year of office, or a Bishop's widow, is not more completely off his or her pedestal than is an extinct editor in his eyes, but I shall always wish him well; there is not a more piteous sight than that of a man struggling with insurmountable adversity. 'Tis not in mortals to command success, nor in some, alas! to deserve it.

The bright side of an editor's life is of course where the Accepted Contributor shines on it. To one who is a true lover of Literature it is a pleasure indeed to see the nugget sparkling in its bed; to be able to tell the worker that he has not toiled in vain, that fame, and perhaps fortune, lie before him. To see the fire of hope kindle in young eyes is a sight to gladden old ones, and it has been my good fortune many times to see it. It is one of the attributes of a generous nature to exaggerate a kindness, but the extent to which this is carried by literary folk is wellnigh incredible. In no other calling are such vast returns of gratitude obtained from so small an investment of assistance. It is not possible in these days for genius to be stifled in the bud, but it is a privilege indeed to encourage it to flower. That is why when 'we' resign our editorships we are not resigned: our life

has lost one of its purest pleasures. There is, however, a noble consolation. The pupils of one generation become our masters in another, but they remain for ever our friends. It is to these, with a sad heart, yet full of pleasant memories, that I bid FAREWELL.

One other word, and I have done. There are two things about my departure that may well console even a sick man. The one, that ill health and not ill humours, no weakening of my long bond of friendship—a cable without a kink—with the founder of THE CORNHILL divorces me from my occupation ; and the other, that of my successor all men have a good word to say. May health attend him, and especially a fine circulation !

JAMES PAYN.

*CLARISSA FURIOSA.*¹

BY W. E. NORRIS.

CHAPTER XXI.

CLARISSA GROWS IMPORTANT.

DURING the fine summer days which ensued, Lady Luttrell declared repeatedly that it made her feel quite ill to read the newspapers, and indeed these had no very cheering information to impart to staunch upholders of the integrity of the Empire. However, it was some consolation to find that, if the perversity of the electorate was injuring her health, it had no deleterious effect upon that of her husband, whom the local practitioner pronounced to be sound in wind and limb. 'A little overworked, perhaps, and the heart's action not quite so regular as one could wish it to be; but a good long holiday will set that right, let us hope.'

Sir Robert was certainly going to have a good long holiday; only before he could begin to enjoy it, it was necessary that he should return to London for the reassembling of Parliament and the anticipated vote of want of confidence which would relieve him and his colleagues of the cares of office. Upon this mournful expedition Lady Luttrell was not desirous of accompanying him; but Madeline, for some reason best known to herself, begged to be allowed to do so, alleging that she wanted to hear the debate, and adding that she would be no trouble, as she had received an invitation from Clarissa to spend a week in Cadogan Gardens. Lady Luttrell doubted the prudence of acceding to this request; but Sir Robert said good-naturedly:

'Oh, let the girl come with me if she likes. Evil communications will hardly corrupt her more than they have done already, and as far as I can understand the matter—which, I confess, isn't very far—our best policy will be to keep upon good terms

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with Guy's wife. In fact, I shall avail myself of this opportunity to be particularly civil to the lady. One hasn't been a Cabinet Minister for all these years without having learned how to be civil to people whose ears one would prefer to box, for choice.'

Sir Robert was, in truth, only too well aware of what important issues depended upon a reconciliation which might be effected by patience and adroitness; he foresaw that Mr. Dent's niece would some day be a very wealthy woman, whereas he neither knew exactly nor wished to know exactly what Guy's probable inheritance would be. Often he said to himself that Guy had been a most infernal ass; but he was conscious that he himself came under much the same condemnation, and if anything was to be accomplished in the direction of atonement by smoothing down Clarissa's ruffled plumage, the least he could do was to undertake that task.

However, he had hardly taken his seat in a reserved railway compartment, with Madeline beside him, when it was borne in upon him after an unpleasantly convincing fashion that his daughter-in-law might prove a hard person to conciliate. For amongst the newspapers and periodicals which he had bought to while away the tedium of the long journey was a certain monthly review, entitled 'Modern England,' which had recently risen into fame, and the first article that caught his eye, as he examined the list of contents, was headed 'The Perjury of Marriage,' by Mrs. Luttrell. That did not sound promising, and Sir Robert turned over the leaves with a frown, expecting to come upon a narrative of personal experience which would do the writer and everybody connected with her infinite harm. But as he read, he was compelled to acknowledge that Clarissa had not only expressed herself with discretion, but had put her case, such as it was, extremely well. It was not, to be sure, much of a case, since all the world has long ago been convinced that, whatever individual instances of hardship may arise out of the institution of marriage, civilisation could not survive the destruction of the family; still, what there was to be urged in favour of a different view was set forth in this article clearly and temperately enough, while the literary style of the composition was, as Sir Robert recognised with surprise, far above the average.

'By Jove!' he muttered, 'this is a clever woman, in spite of her being a fool—and a more dangerous breed than that doesn't

exist. Once let her make herself famous, and there will be the deuce to pay !'

Now, whether a woman can be said to have committed perjury by vowing to love, honour, and obey a man upon whom she subsequently discovers that it is a sheer impossibility for her to bestow such sentiments, and whether, as the gifted authoress contended, the only straightforward course for one who has involuntarily made a vow which cannot be kept is to frankly break that vow, may be questions open to dispute ; but there was obviously some abstract justice in the statement that no human being should be held bound by a contract of the nature of which he or she is ignorant. Mrs. Luttrell said at once that she had little hope of winning over sincere believers in the Sacraments of the Church, who had firm ground beneath their feet when they took their stand upon an alleged Divine law ; but she hastened to add that the number of such persons, even amongst professing believers, was notoriously small and was daily diminishing. It was for the convenience of society in all classes that the present unjust and unfair system was upheld, and her aim was to show that the convenience of society and the well-being of the community at large would, in the long run, be better served by its abolition.

'Oh, that's all you want to show, is it?' thought Sir Robert, with some amusement. 'I should imagine that it will take you all your time, ma'am.'

It must be confessed that she was not entirely successful ; yet she did contrive to show that the existing divorce laws are somewhat one-sided, that a vast number of people are chained together like galley-slaves who would be a great deal happier apart, and that received ideas of what constitutes morality or immorality require some clearing up. But, upon the whole, it was not so much what she said as the way in which she said it that impressed her reader. With a politician's instinctive knowledge of what, at a given moment, is likely to tickle the public ear, he perceived that there was no small danger of Clarissa's being accepted as a prophetess. 'In which case,' he repeated under his breath, 'there will be the deuce to pay !'

He replaced 'Modern England' in his travelling-bag, without showing it to his daughter, stroked his chin reflectively for several minutes, and finally said to himself, 'I must have a talk with Dent about this.' It was perhaps a symptom of decaying powers

that in all troubles and difficulties Sir Robert now turned at once to Mr. Dent.

And indeed it was with Mr. Dent, who met him on the platform at Paddington, that he proposed to take up his quarters for a time, the house in Grosvenor Place having been left in charge of a charwoman. Madeline, for her part, was driven off to Cadogan Gardens in a smart brougham, drawn by a pair of fast-trotting cobs. Clarissa, it seemed, knew how and where to provide herself with the accessories of affluence.

Quite a little crowd of ladies and gentlemen was assembled round the tea-table from which Clarissa rose to welcome her sister-in-law. They had somehow the air of being sycophants, Madeline thought; although they were not in reality precisely that. But they were certainly admirers, and the eulogistic phrases which they addressed at intervals to their hostess were not easily comprehensible to one who had but a vague acquaintance with 'the Movement.' It appeared, however, that Mrs. Luttrell had accomplished some feat or other for which she could not be sufficiently patted on the back; the masculine-looking women, with the short hair and the *pince-nez*, and the feminine-looking men, with the long hair and the low collars, emulated one another in assuring her that she had rendered an epoch-making service to the cause. If the whole crew of them had not worn so very much the appearance of being actors and actresses in a farce, it might have been supposed that they were in deadly earnest. Of Madeline they took very little notice (a method of treatment to which Sir Robert Luttrell's daughter was not accustomed) and she was sincerely glad when they went away.

'What are they making such a cackling about?' she asked, with a touch of excusable irritation, after the door had closed behind the last of them. 'Have you been setting the Thames on fire in the night?'

'Oh, no,' answered Clarissa; 'they are only kind enough to praise a little article of mine in "Modern England," which I thought you might perhaps have seen. I tried to make clear a part of our programme—the part which relates to marriage—in it, and I own to being rather pleased at the manner in which it has been received. Mr. Loosemore tells me that I have a genuine literary faculty, and Mr. Loosemore is admitted, even by those who differ from him, to be a competent critic. But you

shall see the little paper after dinner, if you care to look through it. Come upstairs to your room now and tell me why you have written such miserable, scrappy apologies for letters of late.'

Madeline was not prepared to give the desired information all at once. She had abstained from writing with her customary amplitude because she had not wished to allude to Raoul de Malglaive and because she had found it so difficult to help alluding to him; but she did not even now intend to confess that she had given her heart away to one who was utterly unworthy of the gift. What she believed herself to be in need of was a little moral support in her determination to think no more of the young man; and if that had been really what she wanted, she certainly could not have applied to a better quarter for it. In the course of the evening she casually mentioned the paragraph in the French newspaper relating to M. de Malglaive, 'whom I dare say you may remember as a boy at Pau in the old days,' and since—by a mere chance of course—she had brought '*Le Petit Voyou*' with her, Clarissa was soon in a position to agree heartily with the girl's remark that it was 'a truly disgusting story.'

'I mean,' added Madeline, after a pause, 'that it is disgusting if it is true. But I suppose it may be a mere invention.'

'Clarissa laughed. 'It *may* be: but the chances, you may be sure, are quite a thousand to one the other way. If you had heard half the things that I have heard during the last few months, you would cease to be surprised at any accusation of that kind being brought against any man.'

'I don't think I want to hear them,' said Madeline.

'One doesn't want to hear them; it is horrible and sickening to hear them. Yet to see things as they are is always better than to remain blind. Things must not and cannot go on as they are: of that I am convinced.'

She remained silent for a few moments, and then, meeting with no response from the girl, in whose eyes there was a suspicion of tears, she rose suddenly and, kneeling down beside the latter, threw her arms round her neck.

'Madeline dear,' she said, 'you haven't told me much, and I won't bother you to tell more than you feel inclined to tell; but I can guess how it is with you. Haven't I been through it all myself? Only in my case knowledge came too late, whereas in yours there is no irreparable harm done yet—'

'I don't know what you call irreparable,' interrupted Madeline, who had been made to peruse her sister-in-law's article before this; 'you seem to think that unhappy marriages can be set aside at any moment. Not that I have the slightest idea of ever marrying M. de Malglaive, who has never asked me.'

'Ah, but you must not think that I separated myself from my husband without a struggle or that my present position doesn't lay me open to daily annoyances. It is for the sake of others much more than for my own that I am living as I do now. Somebody must begin, you see. But never mind me; it is about you that I want to talk.'

And she talked kindly and sympathetically enough for the next quarter of an hour, proving that she at least understood her own sex, if she did not know quite as much as she thought she did about the other, and conveying comfort of a sort to a girl who, being both proud and sore, sadly required a little comfort. That it did not happen to be comfort of the right sort was scarcely her fault. She gave what she had to give, and was in a measure successful.

'But if Frenchmen, as well as Englishmen, are what you say they are,' Madeline observed at length, 'one had better make up one's mind never to marry at all.'

To which Clarissa rejoined: 'You might form a much worse resolution. Women don't exist for the sole purpose of marrying somebody and becoming the mothers of somebody's children. That is just what we want to be understood and acknowledged.'

It was because she and her friends were of opinion that women are every bit as good as men (when they are not better), and not because contemporary politics possessed any special interest for her, that Clarissa had felt constrained to range herself amongst the opponents of her uncle's and Sir Robert Luttrell's party. Accordingly, she was quite willing to accompany Madeline to the House of Commons a day or two later and to listen to the debate on the Address which was certain to terminate in the defeat of the Tory Ministry. No orator who is well aware that defeat awaits him can be expected to exhibit himself at his best, nor were the first two days of this somewhat perfunctory discussion productive of any striking displays of eloquence from the occupants of the Treasury bench; but on the third and concluding day Sir Robert Luttrell rose and delivered what has since been pronounced

to be the very best speech with which he had ever delighted the House. He was not unaccustomed to delighting an assembly with which he had always been popular; he thoroughly understood his audience and knew exactly how to make his points tell; but on this occasion he fairly surpassed himself. The enemy, as it happened, was unusually open to attack; the methods by which victory had been won at the polls had not been precisely patriotic methods; the programme of the victors was understood to be one which they themselves had until recently condemned in no uncertain tones. So Sir Robert, whose quiet good-humour and unforced wit proved far more effective than the diatribes of some of his predecessors in the debate, had it in his power to make them look rather foolish and uncomfortable. In his peroration, which was really fine, and which, unlike the rest of his speech, seemed to have been carefully prepared, he foretold the result of tactics which, he said, had never been resorted to before in his long experience, and warned honourable and right honourable gentlemen opposite that they had established a precedent which must inevitably bring about their own eventual discomfiture. Something of the pathos of a last farewell was infused into his concluding sentences, which were measured, dignified, and free from any suspicion of rancour. For indeed he was an old man, and it was not probable that the variable breeze of public favour would ever waft him back to the seat which he resumed amidst loud and prolonged cheering.

Clarissa sighed, as she looked down upon the scene from the Ladies' Gallery, remembering the only previous occasion on which she had heard Sir Robert address the House and all that had happened to her and others since then.

'Isn't it almost enough to make one believe that he is right and that the nation is wrong?' she whispered to her companion.

'Why shouldn't the nation be wrong? If right or wrong were a mere question of majorities, I suppose the people who write for "Modern England" would be squashed quite flat,' returned Madeline pertinently.

That fate, at all events, could not be prevented by Sir Robert Luttrell or anybody else from overtaking the Tory administration, which resigned office on the following day. The news was conveyed to Clarissa in a note from her uncle, who, rather to her surprise, added: 'Will you give me and your father-in-law some dinner if we knock at your door at 8 o'clock to-morrow evening?

We have been receiving so many condolences from our supporters that we think it would make a pleasant change to be trampled upon by a triumphant adversary.'

Mr. Dent not unfrequently claimed the hospitality of his niece, with whom he studiously abstained from discussing controversial subjects, and although he provoked her, she enjoyed his companionship. As for Sir Robert, she would of course be very glad to see him, and wrote at once to say so; but she was in some doubt as to whether his intentions in thus inviting himself to her house were of a wholly friendly order.

Whatever Sir Robert's intentions may have been, his manner, when he greeted his daughter-in-law, was friendly in the highest degree, and throughout the evening he took evident pains to make himself agreeable to her. He complimented her upon her article in 'Modern England,' which he had read, he declared, with sincere pleasure and admiration.

'You won't ask a petrified old Tory to agree with your views,' he remarked smilingly; 'but I am sure you will continue to write as cleverly and charmingly after you have modified them a little.'

'I don't think I shall modify them,' said Clarissa.

'No? Yet Tories and Radicals alike are apt to find that some deductions have to be made from the views of youth before middle age has been reached. At all events, by the time that old age has been reached it is possible to enjoy the society of those from whom one differs; and that is why I hope you will be persuaded to give us a little of yours at Haccombe this summer.'

Clarissa had promised to spend the summer at her uncle's country house in Sussex. She thanked Sir Robert, without committing herself, feeling indeed pretty sure that he could not seriously wish her to revisit Haccombe Luttrell. However, he recurred to the subject when Netta came down to dessert and when, after lifting the child up on his knee, he asked her whether she would not like to stay for a time with her grandparents.

'We can offer you sea-bathing and fishing, and I dare say we might find a pony for you to ride,' said he, by way of inducement.

Smiles and dimples appeared upon Netta's round face; but presently she asked, with a sudden accession of gravity and anxiety, 'Will Father be there?'

'Ah, well, I don't know about that,' answered Sir Robert, not

at all disconcerted; 'your father, I suppose, won't get leave before the autumn. The country hasn't told him yet, as it has been kind enough to tell me, that his services can be dispensed with.'

This was the sole reference made to Guy in the course of the evening. At a later hour Sir Robert talked politics, listened with courteous deference to Clarissa's Radical pronouncements, and admitted that there was a great deal to be said in favour of female suffrage. When he rose to take his leave, he declared that he had spent a most delightful evening, while Clarissa replied, with perfect truth, that if the evening had been delightful, it was he who had made it so.

But despite this interchange of amenities, Sir Robert was not a happy man as he left the house. Walking down the broad deserted street with his old friend—for the night was so hot and airless that they decided to return to Portland Place on foot—he remarked:

'Your system of leaving things to right themselves is all very fine, Dent; but the question is whether they aren't as right already as she wants them to be. I should have liked to see her a good deal more angry and a good deal more triumphant. The pleasure of independence, unfortunately, is just one of those few pleasures which grow rather than pall upon one.'

'You speak as a man,' answered Mr. Dent; 'no woman really likes to be independent, whatever it may suit her to assert. Not that I expect Clarissa to climb down from her perch to-morrow or next day: you will have to give her time.'

Sir Robert thought, but did not like to say in so many words, that that was exactly what he could not afford to give. Dent must be well aware that the loss of an actual 5,000*l.* a year and a prospective income very much larger would be a serious matter for the Luttrell family; but this aspect of the matter had not been touched upon in previous conversations, and it was rather difficult to take the initiative in alluding to it. So Sir Robert, after a brief period of silence, only said:

'Well, I shall be dead and buried before the curtain falls, most likely. And after me the deluge, eh? Tell me honestly, Dent—can I carry on for another couple of years, do you think?'

'There will be the proceeds of the sale of your house in Grosvenor Place,' answered Mr. Dent.

'Yes, I know; but they will be claimed at once, will they

not? What I want you to tell me is this: can these people be prevented from foreclosing?’

‘Well, yes,’ answered Mr. Dent, ‘I may say now that foreclosure can be avoided for the present. I think, considering the pass to which matters have come, you can’t do better than leave them to me. Later in the year we must see what can be done.’

‘Can anything be done?’

‘One hardly knows: there are complications, you see. But you may rely upon me to do the best I can for you, Luttrell, and I rely upon you not to worry yourself. At our time of life worry means illness, remember.’

‘And at our time of life illness is very apt to mean death, I suppose? Between ourselves, Dent, I don’t know that my death, now that my political life is at an end, would be a great misfortune for anybody. There would be a certain amount of ready money, I presume, and my wife has her own little property in France. I should leave my family landless and impoverished, but not ruined, I take it.’

But to this Mr. Dent, who had stopped to light a cigar, made no reply.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FLOWER-GIRL AND THE POET.

RELIEF from public responsibilities did not, of course, enable the ex-Chancellor of the Duchy to quit London forthwith. There were formalities to be gone through, there were the seals of office to be delivered up, there were also sundry matters of private business to be transacted with the family lawyers which Mr. Dent, accommodating as he was, could hardly undertake on his friend’s behalf. So it was arranged that Madeline should stay with Clarissa, who was eager to retain her, until such time as her father should be free to escort her home.

‘Now I do want you,’ Clarissa said, ‘to bring an unprejudiced mind to bear upon the people whom you will meet here at luncheon and dinner. I don’t deny that their appearance is rather funny, or that they are quite unlike your mother’s friends, or that they sometimes make speeches which it would perhaps be better not to make; but, after all, one must judge one’s neighbour’s by what they do, not by what they say, and these people are really engaged upon a great work.’

Nobody would have supposed so, to look at them ; they had so little the air of being toilers in any field, and they talked so incessantly that it was difficult to believe they could have time or strength left to do anything else. The men, especially, did not convey the impression of possessing much physical strength, although they ate and drank more than would have satisfied an average navy. As for the women, Madeline found them, upon the whole, less repulsive, if not less ridiculous. Stout Lady Kettering, who had the courage to walk about the streets with her nether limbs arrayed in voluminous garments similar to those in use amongst Eastern ladies ; pretty little Mrs. Hamley, the authoress of several startling and realistic works of fiction ; Mrs. Knibbs, the loud-voiced champion of free thought and free love, who was said to have driven the late Professor Knibbs to seek peace in self-destruction and who seemed to have reached an age at which her peculiar opinions were unlikely to involve her in any personal peril—all these were indeed, as Clarissa had said, rather funny in appearance and very unlike Lady Luttrell's friends ; yet it was impossible to listen to them long without suspecting that their bark was worse than their bite.

Mr. Alfred Loosemore, on the contrary, who barked in dulcet tones, might be capable of inflicting a nasty, poisonous wound upon the hand that caressed him. Such, at least, was the conviction of Madeline, who abhorred this portly, smooth-shaven poet, with his shock of wiry black hair, his whispered innuendoes, his sententious aphorisms, and his invincible self-satisfaction.

‘If you want to know what I think of him,’ she said to Clarissa, ‘I think he is a perfect pig—and I only wish I knew how to tell him so !’

‘He wouldn't mind,’ answered Clarissa ; ‘he is accustomed to being called names. Abuse, he always says, is much more to be desired than flattery, because it is quite as complimentary and a good deal less embarrassing.’

‘He must have queer ideas as to what is meant by a compliment,’ remarked Madeline ; ‘but if he really likes being called a pig, all he has to do is to apply to me. He will find me ever ready to address him as what he really is.’

‘Lucky man !’ said a voice behind her ; ‘it isn't everybody who gets such a chance of seeing himself as others see him. And who, if one may be permitted to ask, is the gentleman who would enjoy being called a pig by you, Madeline ?’

Paul Luttrell had become a frequent visitor of Clarissa's—so frequent, indeed, that he often took the liberty of entering her drawing-room unannounced. Busy and interested almost exclusively in his East End parish, he nevertheless found time to call occasionally upon West End ladies who likewise were, or professed to be, interested in the work that he was carrying on and whose alms were well worth the sacrifice of an hour or so to secure. As for Clarissa, she had even gone so far as to give him intermittent personal assistance in that work; for she had recognised from the outset that the wrongs of women are not confined to the upper class. So he proceeded to state the errand upon which he had come to Cadogan Gardens, after bestowing a fraternal embrace upon Madeline and cordially agreeing with her in her appreciation of the talented Loosemore.

'Men like that,' he said, in his decisive, parsonical way, 'are a blot upon the face of creation. In healthier times they would have been knocked on the head, as every human being deserves to be who preaches a sort of refined unhealthiness. It would be a salutary change for you, Clarissa, to be introduced to some people who are certainly healthy, if they aren't over-refined. I came to ask whether you would be disposed to come down to Southend tomorrow and spend a happy day with me and my flower-girls. I have arranged a holiday for them, and you said you wanted to see what they were like. They want very much to see what you are like, because the dress and manners of fashionable ladies interest them beyond everything, and as they are sure to be rather obstreperous, your restraining influence might be a help to me.'

The Reverend Paul, amongst whose parishioners and friends were numbered costermongers, professional beggars, and even professional thieves, had of late been much occupied with the young women who earn a livelihood by selling flowers at street corners. He had set up a club for them, had induced them to attend classes, and had contrived—not without preliminary difficulty—to win their confidence and affection. Clarissa, who had been informed that a tendency to rush into hasty and improvident matrimony was one of their most pronounced characteristics, had often expressed a wish to be brought into contact with them, and she said at once:

'Of course we will join the party; there is nothing that I should enjoy more. The only thing is that I am afraid we must

be home by eight o'clock, as I have one or two people coming to dinner. Would that be manageable, do you think ?'

'Perfectly manageable,' answered Paul. 'I don't expect to get home myself until two hours later at earliest ; but as you probably won't so very much enjoy the return in a third-class carriage, with your companions singing street-songs at the top of their voices, it will be just as well for you to retire before our shyness has quite worn off. Madeline, this will give you a glimpse of a section of the community which is altogether ignored by Mr. Alfred Loosemore and his admirers, though it is just as human as they are and far more numerous.'

'The worst of Christians,' remarked Clarissa pensively, 'is that they are so uncharitable. Mr. Loosemore's sympathies are really a great deal wider than yours, Paul, though he doesn't profess to be anything but a heathen, and I am sure he would be delighted to come to Southend with us, if you would ask him.'

'Ah—well, I don't think I'll ask him,' said Paul ; 'I shouldn't like to take the responsibility of leading my flower-girls into such doubtful company. With you I know that I am safe. You may expound your theories to them as amply as you please ; such is their indomitable common sense that they will only roar with laughter at you.'

It was rather Paul's habit to be rude to Clarissa, who was seldom affronted by his rudeness ; but after he had gone away, she told Madeline what a pity it was that he should be so narrow and so ignorant of what was taking place all around him.'

'He looks at everything from the point of view of his own religion, and his own sect,' she said ; 'he doesn't in the least realise the feeling of unrest which exists amongst the poor just as much as amongst the rich nowadays. Everywhere women are beginning to understand that laws have hitherto been made by men for men, that these laws are unfair, and that a great change is near. You have only to watch the women's faces to be convinced of that, even though they still remain mute, from force of habit.'

Possibly the young women of Whitechapel are a backward and uninstructed lot. At all events, the faces of the assemblage which Clarissa and Madeline found marshalled upon the platform at Fenchurch Street the next day expressed neither discontent nor anticipation of any change more portentous than a change of air. That, to be sure, was portentous enough ; for most of them had

never seen the sea, and the nature of their avocation was such that they seldom took advantage even of a Bank Holiday. They would not have given themselves a holiday now, had it not been 'made up to them' by the generosity of certain ladies, whom they took to be represented by Mrs. and Miss Luttrell; so that a warm and grateful reception awaited the pair. They were, to tell the truth, sadly wanting in beauty of form or feature, while the costumes that they wore would assuredly have grieved the soul of Mr. Alfred Loosemore. Those broken draggled ostrich-feathers, those prodigious hats, those cheap frayed ulsters, and, worst of all, those appalling, misshapen boots formed indeed a spectacle which could not have been otherwise than painful to a philosophic hedonist; yet happy faces, even when they are ugly ones, are, after all, pleasanter objects to contemplate than well-made clothes, and the two ladies were soon upon excellent terms with their fellow-excursionists, who were far too excited to display any of the shyness for which Paul had given them credit.

For the rest, *marvaise honte* is a malady more common in Belgravia than in Whitechapel. Miss Sally Brown, for example, who promptly attached herself to Madeline and proved as communicative as she was inquisitive, had probably never suffered from misplaced timidity in the whole course of her professional career. Sally, being seventeen years of age, described herself as 'getting on,' and had for some time past been engaged to be married. Acting upon the advice of the Reverend Paul, of whose sagacity she entertained a high opinion, she proposed to lead her young man ere long to the altar; for, as she shrewdly observed, 'you've got to tyke 'em when they're in the humour for it, and I've kep' Sam wytin' just about as long as he'll wyte, I expect.' Sam, it appeared, was a 'fruit and vegetable salesman' by trade; he had a 'barrer and a moke' of his own, and was therefore in a position, with the aid of his wife's exertions, to support a family. Although he had but just attained his majority, Madeline gathered that he had a gay and stormy career behind him, to which the bride-elect alluded with perfect candour and even with a certain pride. The parson had persuaded him to become a total abstainer, she herself had weaned him from other temptations to which his temperament rendered him peculiarly liable, and she evidently thought that he was likely to prove a better husband from the fact that his bachelor life had not been altogether exemplary.

These confidences, which were poured out with much volubility

during the railway journey, were partially overheard by Clarissa, who was herself jammed in between two loquacious maidens, but who could not allow this opportunity of upholding her testimony against the folly of juvenile marriages to slip. She was not too didactic, she spoke kindly and sympathetically enough, and her hearers did not fulfil Paul's prediction by bursting out laughing in her face; but the doctrine which she preached was obviously not to their taste, and their answers implied that they suspected her of not knowing much. Sally, indeed, took occasion to whisper to Madeline:

'If the lydy thinks men and women is the same, she's got a lot to learn!'

'Oh, she doesn't think that,' Madeline returned; 'she only thinks they ought to be. And so do I.'

Sally shook her head and looked wise, but did not pursue the topic. One does not go out for a day's pleasuring in order to discuss the problems of human life, and that glorious August sunshine was a thing to enjoy and be thankful for, without thought for the morrow.

The heartiness with which those young women enjoyed themselves upon the beach and upon Southend pier made ample amends for any little embarrassment that might have been caused to their conductors by the noise that they made over it. They could not be restrained from walking six abreast, with linked arms, and singing aloud, nor did Paul enter any protest when they took to pelting him and one another with wet seaweed; but poor Sally got herself into trouble by taking off her boots and stockings, lifting up her skirts, and wading among the breakers. This, it seemed, was a sad breach of propriety, and her friends felt bound to rebuke it in language so unambiguous that for a moment she was in imminent danger of being reduced to tears. It was, however, a great consolation to her to learn that Madeline herself, when at home, was much given to paddling, and that ladies of the highest station and respectability were wont to exhibit themselves every evening in a far more undressed condition than she had done. Later in the day, when she, together with the rest of the company, had done justice to a substantial meal, she candidly told Madeline that, from all that she had read in the newspapers and had heard by word of mouth, she was disposed to think that the aristocracy might very well take a lesson from its social inferiors.

'Talk about the men, as that lydy did when we was comin'

down in the trine!—why, they ain't one 'arf so bad as what the women is. And the women 'd be worse, you may depend, if they wasn't afride to it.'

Here Sally, who was a simple, outspoken creature, gave reasons which sounded plausible for the comparatively high standard of morality maintained by her own sex in all classes of the community, adding, however, that in the class to which she belonged distinctions between what she called 'honest gals and bad gals' were somewhat more clearly drawn than elsewhere.

'Yes,' said Madeline; 'but don't you think that, if a man would be very foolish—as of course he would—to marry a bad girl, a girl is just as foolish when she marries a bad man?'

'Well, you see,' answered Sally, 'this is the way of it—it don't make 'em bad, not the same as it does us. A man comes to me and he says, "If I'd ha' met you before, my dear," he says, "I'd ha' kep' more stright." And I says to him, "You've met me now, Sam," I says, "and you've got to keep stright henceforth and for ever." Which, as like as not, he does it.'

'And you ask no questions about the life that he has led before he met you?'

'I shouldn't, miss—not if I was you. Men ain't neither hangels nor women. You can't arst them to beyave as if they was married *before* they're married—nor yet they wouldn't do it, if you was to arst them ever so.'

With this concise statement of Sally Brown's views, which might not perhaps have obtained the unreserved sanction of the Reverend Paul Luttrell, Madeline had to rest content; for she was now called upon to act as umpire in a foot-race between two Whitechapel Atalantas, and soon afterwards Clarissa and she had to hasten back to London.

'Poor things!' sighed Clarissa, as she settled herself in the railway carriage; 'rough as they are, there is a great deal to like and admire in them. Only they are more backward in some ways than I expected to find them. I am afraid it will be a long time before they realise that their lot in life will never be less hard until they combine in demanding what they are entitled to demand.'

Madeline made no rejoinder. She was thinking at the moment that her own lot in life would probably be a hard one if she persisted in demanding what, by all accounts, she was most unlikely to get. It was deplorable that Sam the costermonger should have

exercised so little control over himself, deplorable also that Raoul de Malglaise should have been surprised at a provincial hotel in the company of a *belle Marquise*; but were they, after all, to be treated as unpardonable sinners because they had behaved after the manner of their kind? Something in Sally Brown's philosophy appealed to the common sense of which Madeline had a rather larger share than her sister-in-law; yet she could not but remember that Raoul was without Sam's excuse, inasmuch as he had already met her before the occurrence of the escapade in question.

At dinner that evening it was Miss Luttrell's misfortune to be placed next to Mr. Alfred Loosemore, who professed to be immensely interested in hearing about the Southend excursion.

'A party of flower-girls—it sounds so pretty!' said he. 'Yet Mrs. Luttrell tells me that they were not pretty. Things are never what they ought to be, unhappily!'

'Nor people either,' returned Madeline. 'But I was quite satisfied with the girls; I didn't want them to be pretty.'

'Ah, that is so shocking of you! If you were what you ought to be, you would want everybody and everything to be pretty. And what, I wonder,' continued the poet, turning round in his chair, so as to face his neighbour, and smiling upon her benevolently, 'should I be, if I were what I ought to be?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' answered Madeline, with swift exasperation, 'but I should think you would be dead.'

She was rather ashamed of herself after this little outburst; but she did not appear to have affronted the sublime Alfred, who only chuckled and remarked: 'I suppose you think I am too good for this wicked world. I have often suspected as much myself.'

Nevertheless, he may have made a mental note to the effect that he owed her some return for her civility, and may even have known a little more about her than she imagined that he knew; for not long after this, he led the conversation to the subject of modern society in Paris, where it seemed that he was as much at home as in London, and amongst other names he mentioned that of young de Malglaise, 'who, by the way,' said he, 'hails from Lady Luttrell's department, I believe. Did you ever come across him at Pau?'

'Yes; I have come across him there,' answered Madeline.

'*Ce cher Raoul!*' drawled Mr. Loosemore, who spoke French fluently and who affected the peculiar mincing accent which is not displeasing in a Parisian, but is nothing short of maddening

when aped by anybody else, '*il n'y a que lui!*' His iniquities are always perpetrated with such inimitable seriousness. I am sure there must be scores of ladies who do not believe that he is a monster at all.'

'I suppose I must be one of them,' said Madeline; 'for it certainly did not strike me that there was anything particularly monstrous about M. de Malglaive. He seemed to me to be very like other young men.'

'Ah, my dear Miss Luttrell, the sad truth is that we are almost all of us monsters. Ask your sister-in-law, whose mission it is to reform us and who acquits herself of her mission so exquisitely, whether we are not. At the same time, if I were to tell you all I know about that scandalous Raoul, you would admit that he passes all bounds. But wild horses should not drag such information from me.'

Further information was not solicited by Madeline, who turned her shoulder towards the speaker; but, heartily though she despised him, she could not prevent his shaft from reaching its mark. Sally Brown might forgive her mercurial Sam, and might be wise to do so; but it is neither easy nor perhaps wise to absolve a sinner whose offences are committed with 'inimitable seriousness.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

LA BELLE MARQUISE.

IN days not so very long gone by the pleasant city of Tours used to be held in high favour by French cavalry officers, and thither, under the Second Empire, used to be sent such regiments as, by reason of their aristocratic *cachet*, the authorities deemed it expedient to favour highly. If the aristocrats of Touraine did not openly accept the Second Empire, they at least permitted their sons, nephews, and cousins to wear its uniform, and that these gentlemen should be quartered as far as possible in a province notorious for its Legitimism was perhaps a wise concession to persons whom it might be worth while to conciliate. The Third Republic is understood to have adopted other tactics; aristocratic regiments exist no longer; young men with prefixes to their names are said to have been subjected to many petty annoyances; favour is shown to none (although a touch of disfavour may sometimes be displayed towards a few), and it was doubtless a mere coinci-

dence that the corps to which Raoul de Malglaive belonged, and which still retained the reputation of being a crack corps, formed part of the garrison of Tours during the fine hot summer which witnessed the defeat of the Conservative party on the other side of the Channel.

To Raoul this was scarcely such a subject for congratulation as it was to his brother officers; for the many relations and connections whom he had in the neighbourhood possessed no special attraction for him, while it was a very great nuisance to be at the beck and call of the Marquise de Castelmoron, whose charmingly situated château overlooked the broad Loire. It was true that he had once had a more or less profound admiration for the Marquise de Castelmoron; it was true that he had been a frequent visitor at her Parisian abode and that their intimacy had gone so far that she usually (when they were alone) addressed him by his Christian name; but the world can hardly contain persons whom one is more anxious to avoid than those whom one has profoundly admired once upon a time, and has altogether ceased to admire. Besides, there had been that stupid affair, which had found its way into the newspapers, had given rise to numerous distasteful jocularities, and had not yet been forgotten or disbelieved in, notwithstanding the quasi-public *démentis* of M. de Castelmoron and the circumstance that M. de Malglaive still continued to be the friend of the house.

The affair in question had been indeed stupid enough, though scarcely, Raoul thought, one which could have been avoided. What could he do when the woman wrote, begging him to meet her at a certain time and place? It was idiotic of her to adopt such a method of convincing him that de Castelmoron was not a pattern husband—especially as he did not care in the least whether de Castelmoron was a pattern husband or not—but to decline the *rendezvous* would have been practically impossible. Then the absurd scene which had ensued, the mutual recriminations, his own impatient offer to fight the irate little man who had been so easily pacified, the somewhat ignoble understanding which had eventually been patched up between the husband and wife—all this did not shape itself into a very agreeable memory or render Raoul particularly eager to be stationed in the department of the Indre-et-Loire. He was not, however, aware that an account of the adventure had found its way into the public press of his own department; still less did he imagine for one moment that any

echo of it could have reached the distant ears of the girl to whom all his heart and most of his thoughts belonged.

Very often—being so completely without means of ascertaining where she was or what she was about—he had pictured Madeline to himself mixing in that brilliant society which would naturally be open to the daughter of a Cabinet Minister, surrounded by admirers, oblivious of a certain fine spring afternoon at Lourdes and of all that she had said then and afterwards respecting her disinclination to marry an Englishman; so that he had not been sorry to hear of the general election which, he presumed, would have the effect of sending her and her people away from the metropolis to the comparative solitude of the provinces. But he was quite sorry to learn from the columns of the 'Figaro' and other journals which boasted of a foreign correspondent that Sir Robert Luttrell's party had met with a hostile reception at the polls. He even thought that the occasion might justify the despatch of a few words of condolence from a foreign friend of Sir Robert's family, just as victory might have been made the pretext for a letter of congratulation.

And so, after a day or two of hesitation and deliberation, he sat down and penned a missive to Lady Luttrell which did credit alike to his head and to his heart. It was a composition which no young Englishman would ever have dreamt of committing to paper; but, fortunately for him, he was writing to a Frenchwoman, who, notwithstanding her long residence abroad, would not be in the least likely to laugh at him, but would, on the contrary, be sure to appreciate the correctness of his attitude. The political sentiments with which he contrived to fill three closely written pages were both unexceptionable in themselves and of a nature to gratify those who, during a period of transition, are striving to arrest the too rapid advance of democracy; incidental expressions of personal respect for Sir Robert were well and gracefully put, while nothing could be more natural or more proper than that Lady Luttrell's correspondent should wind up with a modest request that he might be recalled to the memory of her daughter. But what was so very astute of him was that he managed, before reaching his elaborate concluding phrase, to ask a question which could hardly in courtesy be left unanswered. His mother, he said (and this was perfectly true), had written to him lately about her health in terms which caused him some uneasiness. Would Lady Luttrell, who was so old a friend of his

mother, do him the great kindness to tell him whether, in her opinion, he ought to absent himself from France under such circumstances? He asked because he believed that, either in Africa or in Tonquin, there might be a chance of his seeing some active service, and because he had sometimes thought of applying to be transferred to those remote regions. But of course his first duty was to his mother, and if Lady Luttrell had noticed any sign of those failing powers to which Madame de Malglaive alluded, a word would suffice to make him renounce such ideas.

Raoul posted his letter with confident hopes of shortly receiving replies to queries which were not stated therein, as well as to the one which was. His mother was a wiry old lady who was likely to live for another twenty years or more, although she sometimes complained of aches and pains. Certainly, however, she would not wish him to fight savages in pestilential climates, nor did he seriously contemplate such a step, save in occasional moments of depression. But would Lady Luttrell care whether he lived or died?—whether he spent next winter in Sénégal or in the Basses-Pyrénées? That was what he wanted to know, and that was what he expected to be told; for he did not doubt her capacity for reading between the lines, and he felt sure that, should she deem him beneath notice as a suitor for her daughter's hand, she would find means of intimating as much quite civilly. Moreover, if he had been forestalled, and if the London season had brought about Madeline's betrothal to another man, he would at least have the miserable satisfaction of hearing the truth and being put out of suspense.

He had turned his back upon the Post Office, and was pacing meditatively along the broad sun-baked street, when a shrill voice which he knew only too well called him by name. Madame de Castelmoron's carriage had been brought to a standstill beside the curbstone, and Madame de Castelmoron's beautifully gloved hand was beckoning to him imperiously. She was a plump, brown-locked little lady of thirty or thereabouts, who at the distance of a few yards looked fully ten years younger than she really was; her round cheeks, her turned-up nose, her bright eyes, and her very red lips stamped her as belonging to that class of beauties who must needs look young if they are to be beauties at all, and everything that art could accomplish towards producing that desirable result had been employed in her case with skill and judgment.

‘But in what hole have you been burying yourself?’ she cried; ‘*on ne vous voit plus!* And yet you might have guessed how well I am amusing myself, all alone in our deplorable château! Yes, all alone; for Philippe has been recalled to Paris on business.’ With a glance at the servants, she lowered her voice to add, ‘That means that he has returned to his edifying *vie de garçon*. After all, I prefer that to the insupportable good behaviour of which he has been guilty during the last few weeks. Now at least he is free, and so am I.’

‘I congratulate you,’ said Raoul gravely.

‘You will give me something to congratulate myself upon if you will come and help to enliven my solitude,’ returned the lady graciously. ‘Next Thursday at *déjeuner*? Oh, there is no need to raise your eyebrows. I shall have a little party to meet you, including my aunt de Richemont, who is a model of all the virtues. In the afternoon we shall perhaps go out sailing on the river—always under the strictest *surveillance*, you understand.’

Raoul accepted the invitation without enthusiasm, but not without a certain sense of relief. He did not want to breakfast with Madame de Castelmoron or to go out sailing with her; but it was something to be assured that she had no intention of placing him in any more compromising situations. He forgot all about her as soon as she was out of his sight, and reverted to the musings which she had interrupted. In a week’s time, he calculated—or, allowing for all possible delays, in ten days’ time—he would know how far he would be able to count upon the support of the Luttrell family in his suit. After that, there would be his mother’s certain opposition to be overcome and Madeline’s own consent to be gained. The third achievement was doubtless the most important, and might prove the most difficult of accomplishment; but he placed it last because he did not see how it could be undertaken at all until the other two had been disposed of. In France respect for parents has survived loss of respect for everybody and everything else.

It was, at all events, scarcely possible for Raoul, nor apparently was it expected of him, to entertain much respect for Madame de Castelmoron, at whose château he duly presented himself on the day appointed by her. The Castelmorons were well known to be half-ruined (indeed, Raoul, whose privilege it had been to accommodate M. le Marquis with more than one loan, sometimes wondered how many people it took to pay Madame la Marquise’s

dressmaker), and their provincial establishment was regulated upon principles of the strictest economy. The house was crumbling for want of repairs, the furniture had not been renewed for many years, the servants were few, and the cooking far from first-rate. On the other hand, one was always sure of being amused at the informal entertainments which Madame de Castelmoron organised from time to time. So, at least, Raoul's brother-officers, three or four of whom he found already seated in her *salon* when he made his entrance, were wont to affirm, and certainly their subsequent conduct seemed to show that they had grounds for making the assertion. Several young and frisky matrons had been asked to meet them; the conversation which took place at the round breakfast-table was more highly seasoned than the dishes; there was a great deal of loud laughter, and probably the only two guests who failed to enjoy themselves were Raoul de Malglaive and Madame de Richemont, a quiet old lady who was afraid of her niece and who also (for her own good fortune and that of others) was stone-deaf.

Madame de Richemont raised no objection when an aquatic excursion was proposed later in the afternoon, only pleading that she might not be required to take part in it. 'For,' she said plaintively, 'I have always looked forward to dying in my bed, like a good Christian.' But she would perhaps have felt it her duty to enter a mild protest, had she accompanied those ladies and gentlemen to the riverside and witnessed their embarkation. It was scarcely *convenable*, she might have urged, that her niece and M. de Malglaive should occupy a tiny sailing-boat all to themselves; but as her remarks would assuredly not have been listened to, if she had been present, her absence was of the less consequence.

Raoul, for his part, did not particularly mind this enforced *tête-à-tête*; he had foreseen what awaited him, and he bore it with philosophy. It was the old story which was poured into his ears—the story to which he had listened so many times, and in which, if the truth must be confessed, he had once believed. Philippe's cruelties and infidelities, Madame de Castelmoron's lamentations over a marriage into which she had been coerced when a mere child, the excuses which she put forward in defence of certain undeniable irregularities of her own—all this had to be heard, sympathised with and responded to after the only appropriate fashion that Raoul knew of. It took a long time, and

Madame de Castelmoron, who held the tiller, would have capsized the boat a dozen times in the course of the interview, if there had been any wind; but the weather, though close, dull, and threatening thunder, was still, and the sail flapped loosely as Raoul and his fair companion drifted down the broad glassy stream. One of them was far away in the spirit, while the other, who was accustomed to his taciturn absent ways, flattered herself that he was dreaming about her.

He was dreaming about a very different person—about one whose ideas respecting the subject upon which Madame de Castelmoron was descanting with so much fervour had always seemed to him to be painfully just, albeit opposed to those of the rest of the world. He would not have liked Madeline Luttrell to know what his life had been, he would not have liked her to see him where he was now—and yet he could have sworn to her with a clear conscience that she was the only woman in the world whom he had ever loved. Would she believe him, he wondered, if the time should ever come for him to take that oath? In the face of facts with which she might easily be made acquainted, it really did not seem certain that she would.

He was startled out of his rather despondent reverie by a warning shout from one of the rowing-boats astern which contained Madame de Castelmoron's friends. He glanced over his shoulder, saw what was coming, and made an instinctive clutch at the tiller, which he failed to secure. But, in any case, he would probably have been too late. The sudden gust which came sweeping across the water caught the diminutive craft before he knew where he was, and in another moment he was performing an involuntary act of descent towards the bottom of the Loire. At the best of times he was no great swimmer, nor is a tight cavalry uniform quite the most suitable costume that could be designed for feats of natation; still, he did not lose his presence of mind, and his first thought, on rising to the surface, was naturally for the lady whose heedlessness had brought about this catastrophe. Not a little to his relief, he heard her calling him by name in accents which proved that she was in no danger of being drowned.

'Scramble up on the boat, Raoul! As for me I shall stay where I am until somebody can give me a hand.'

The boat was floating on her beam-ends; Madame de Castelmoron, who, by better luck than she deserved, had been thrown into the sail, was seated there, with one arm flung round the

mast ; prompt assistance was forthcoming, and a few moments later the shipwrecked pair were on land, drenched, but safe.

‘*Coup de théâtre manqué,*’ remarked Madame de Castelmoron, looking down ruefully at her dripping garments. ‘If at least you had saved my life, after an exciting struggle, that would have been some compensation for the ruin of a new gown : as it is you will have to buy me another one, and we will say no more about it. Come, let us walk home as fast as we can before the thunder-storm begins. It is true that we need not be afraid of rain now ; but I am afraid of lightning, and these ladies, I am sure, would be very much afraid of admitting us into their boat in our present condition.’

It is certainly wiser for people who are wet to the skin to trust to their own legs than to any other means of locomotion ; but Madame de Castelmoron, who never exerted herself if she could help it, yielded to the solicitations of her friends, submitted to be enveloped in shawls, and sat down in the stern of the rowing-boat, whither Raoul reluctantly followed her. He was not allowed to return straight to his own quarters, as he wished to do ; he was assured that somebody should be despatched at once from the château to fetch a change of clothing for him, and he did not like to mention that an attack of fever and ague which had placed his life in jeopardy some two years before had compelled him to be rather careful about contracting chills.

The unfortunate consequence of this was that, whereas Madame de Castelmoron was not a penny the worse for her ducking, M. de Malglaive perforce remained her guest that night. He made a valiant effort to leave the house with the rest of the party, who lingered, chatting and sipping sweet Malaga wine, until the expected thunderstorm had spent itself, but found that he was physically incapable of doing so. His teeth were chattering, his head was swimming ; he was in no state to disobey the commands of Madame de Richemont, who insisted upon his being put to bed at once and upon sending for the doctor.

Before many hours were past he was in a high fever ; and on the following day two of the most competent medical men of Tours were shaking their heads over him. It was impossible, they declared, to say as yet what his malady might turn to ; but what admitted of no doubt at all was that he would have to remain where he was for an indefinite length of time. That being so, it clearly behoved Madame de Richemont, who dwelt

hard by, to take up her temporary residence under her niece's roof; and this she did willingly, being a kind-hearted old lady, as well as an excellent nurse. Madame de Castelmoron, too, rose to the level of the occasion, and, during the days and nights of anxiety which followed, proved that a woman may be vain, silly, unscrupulous, yet retain some of those qualities which in all ages have been the property and the glory of her sex.

As for the patient himself, he was happily unconscious of a condition of things which, had he had his wits about him, would probably have worried him to death. To be so indebted to Madame de Castelmoron, of all women in the world!—to be nursed by her through a dangerous illness!—what more cruel trick could Fortune have played upon him? However, he was raving and tossing in delirium the whole time; so that his chances of recovery were not impeded by any suspicion of where he was.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LITTLE DOSE OF POISON.

It can hardly have been in consequence of skilful and assiduous nursing that Raoul de Malglaive escaped the rheumatic fever with which he was threatened by the doctors; but his illness, no doubt, might have proved a much more serious affair than it did, had he been less carefully tended, and it was only natural and right that, when he was restored to consciousness and convalescence, he should feel exceedingly grateful to the kind ladies who waited upon him. One does not, in such times of weakness and pleasant drowsiness, vex one's brain greatly with connected thought. Raoul was but dimly aware of the circumstances which had landed him in that cool spacious room; for several days he was content to lie there passively, to listen to the sounds of life which floated to him through the open windows, to watch Madame de Castelmoron moving softly hither and thither in her becoming airy draperies, and to murmur a few words of thanks to good old Madame de Richemont when she arranged his pillows for him or made him swallow his medicine.

This enjoyable semi-trance was brought to a somewhat abrupt termination one morning by Madame de Castelmoron, who, after bringing him his breakfast, asked, with a smile, 'And pray, who is Madeline?'

‘Madeline?’ repeated the invalid, glancing uneasily at his questioner, and falling forthwith out of dreamland into the domain of actualities.

‘Yes; the Madeline whom you invoked without ceasing in your delirium. It is a droll name. Madeleine—Madelon—à la bonne heure! But who ever heard of a Madeline before? For the rest, in the world to which she probably belongs an original label is a *trouvaille*, I suppose.’

The world to which Madeline Luttrell probably belonged!—he was upon the point of giving utterance to the horror with which such an insinuation filled him, but checked himself. Was it not, after all, better to leave ill alone?

‘Is one responsible,’ he asked reproachfully, ‘for what one may say or do in delirium?’

Madame de Castelmoron laughed. ‘It is for what you did when you were in full possession of your senses that you ought to be held responsible,’ she replied. ‘But do not be alarmed; you are in the house of a discreet friend, who may have one or two little sins upon her own conscience, and who is not so easily shocked by the sound of feminine names as I am sure your mother would be. *À propos*, are you not very much obliged to me for having omitted to telegraph or write to your mother?’

He could not but own that he was; although he now reflected, with a pang of remorse, that a good many of Madame de Malglaive’s constant missives must have remained unanswered.

‘Are there any letters for me?’ he asked.

‘A mass,’ answered Madame de Castelmoron. ‘We thought it best not to trouble you with your correspondence before; but if you feel that you are in a state to grapple with it, it shall be handed over to you.’

It was handed over to him shortly afterwards, and, naturally enough, he selected from the pile for first perusal a letter which bore an English stamp and an English post-mark. Not without some acceleration of the heart’s action and some trembling of the fingers (for he was still far from having recovered his ordinary strength) did he tear open Lady Luttrell’s envelope and read the very friendly and gracious reply with which it had pleased her to acknowledge his condolences. Lady Luttrell, as we know, had never been inclined to look with an unfavourable eye upon Raoul de Malglaive as a possible son-in-law. She knew that he would be, if he was not already, very comfortably off; she suspected that

her daughter was not ill-disposed towards him, and she had had melancholy and provoking proofs of her daughter's reluctance to espouse a suitable person merely because that person happened to be suitable. Clearly, therefore, it would be a sad mistake to let Raoul ship himself off for Tonquin, and she wrote that, since he had done her the honour of consulting her upon the subject, she must earnestly dissuade him from giving his mother so much pain.

'One understands,' said she, 'your weariness of garrison life and your desire for something a little more exciting; but I think that, if you were to banish yourself from France, you might afterwards deeply regret having done so, and I am persuaded that, upon consideration, you will abandon this idea. Frankly, I shall be very much disappointed if we do not see you at Pau next winter. My husband and my daughter, who thank you for your amiable remembrance of them, beg me to say that they share entirely the opinion which I have permitted myself to express.'

This last statement was purely apocryphal, neither Sir Robert nor Madeline having been so much as informed that a letter had been received from young de Malglaive; but Lady Luttrell considered herself at liberty to round off her phrase in that way, just as most people consider themselves entitled to send 'love' or 'kind remembrances' to their correspondents from members of the family who do not chance to be in the room at that moment. Lady Luttrell, in fact, did not mean a great deal by her letter: she merely thought that it would be a tempting of Providence to snatch away the bait from a nibbling fish, and was not altogether averse to landing him, in the event of other lines failing to secure a heavier one.

But Raoul, with his imperfect comprehension of English ways, took her to mean far more, and attributed a significance which it did not deserve to her mention of her daughter. To say in so many words that a young lady will be disappointed if she does not see you at a certain time and place—is not that to say everything? He would have been capable of despatching a formal offer of marriage to the young lady's parents then and there, if he had not reflected that it would be scarcely respectful to his mother to take so portentous a step without consulting her, and if he had not felt only too sure that his mother would be against him in the matter.

Consequently, he refrained from committing that foolish action;

but he proceeded forthwith to commit another at least equally foolish; for, in his joy and exultation, what must he needs do but admit Madame de Castelmoron into his confidence! It is quite impossible to explain or account for the amazing things that men of ordinary, or even extraordinary, common sense will do when they are in love. The wondering student of human nature can but take note of such phenomena and humbly pray that he himself may be preserved from ever requesting a woman at whose feet he has once knelt to sympathise with him in the transfer of his allegiance to one younger, more beautiful, more innocent, in every way more desirable than she. Raoul may have thought—most likely he did think—that the fair recipient of his confidences was fonder of admiration than of admirers; his modesty may have forbidden him to suppose that the loss of one admirer out of so many could be a source of any vexation to her; he may also have considered that there is a certain incongruity between nursing the sick and flirtation. But perhaps the truth was only that, being so happy, he could not for the life of him help telling somebody how happy he was.

Madame de Castelmoron's face while he was narrating his love-tale might have furnished him with an instructive study if he had had eyes to see it; but all he saw was that she was smiling pleasantly upon him and that she appeared to take a deep and sympathetic interest in what she was being told.

'Sincere felicitations!' said she, when he had finished. 'For myself, I abhor Englishwomen; I find them stupid, ungainly in their movements, and spoilt for all social purposes by their unfortunate habit of having such enormous families. But your Madeline, we will hope, is an exception to the general rule. At any rate, I presume you think so; and that is the essential point, is it not?'

He certainly thought so. To speak of Madeline Luttrell as 'stupid' or 'ungainly in her movements' was to display so absurd an ignorance of the person alluded to that it seemed quite necessary to describe her in detail; after which it was difficult to help indulging in rhapsodies which were listened to without interruption.

'And yet,' observed Madame de Castelmoron gently at length, 'it is not such a very long time, Raoul, since you were ready to swear that your whole heart belonged to some one who is rather nearer to you now than Mademoiselle Luttrell.'

He had the sublime fatuity to reply, 'You must forgive me.

One imagines oneself in love a hundred times ; but I believe that no human being is ever really in love more than once. Besides, you only amused yourself with me for a time ; you will forget my existence, I am sure, long before I forget your kindness—and Madame de Richemont's.'

'I do not, I confess, propose to hang myself in consequence of your infidelity,' she returned dryly ; 'since you are a man, you could scarcely, without a frank paradox, be faithful to any one woman. But those hundred imaginary loves of which you speak !—it is rather a large number. Do you not think that the enchanting Madeline may have a question or two to ask you about them ?'

Ah ! that was just the trouble. Raoul quoted sundry strange and disquieting speeches which had fallen from the lips of his beloved and which made him apprehensive that she might demand from him more than he had it in his power to bestow upon her. He was very anxious to have Madame de Castelmoron's opinion upon this singular aspect of his case. Assuredly he had not lived the life of a saint, and no one could regret more than he did the follies of which he had been guilty ; but he did not think that he had been much worse than his fellows, nor could he see that the past had a great deal to say to the future.

'*À tout péché miséricorde,*' he concluded, with an appealing glance at the little lady beside him, who had much ado to keep her countenance.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'This comes of losing your heart to an Englishwoman,' she remarked ; 'they are unheard of, with their ideas and their theories ! Nevertheless—I do not say it to discourage you ; but it seems to me that, without being an Englishwoman, this young lady might find some little things to object to in what you have done and are doing. Your presence here at this moment, for example—what would she think of that, I wonder ?'

Raoul was rather afraid that she would not like it, and hoped that she would not hear of it—although, to be sure, it admitted of an explanation which must be acknowledged by everybody to be entirely satisfactory. For the rest, there was no great danger that she would hear of it. The dangers and difficulties which he foresaw were of another kind, and would, he thought, demand a good deal of circumspection on his part. He told his amiable adviser all about it ; he did not disguise from her that there would

be trouble with his mother ; he pointed out—and she quite agreed with him—that he had as yet received no more than an implied permission to pay his addresses to Miss Luttrell ; he was inclined, upon the whole, to think that he had better possess his soul in patience until he should meet her once more at Pau during the coming winter.

Madame de Castelmoron replied that, by her way of thinking, that would be a good plan. She added that she was infinitely obliged to him for having done her the honour to seek counsel of her, that she had never in her life heard anything more charming or touching than the romance with which she had been regaled, and that, as it was quite time for him to take his *bouillon*, she would go and inquire why it had not been sent upstairs.

Outside the door she paused, clenched her teeth and her hands, and hissed out a few words which would have taken Raoul completely by surprise, had he overheard them. He had been perfectly correct in his conjecture that she cared very little about him as an individual ; but she cared a great deal about her vanity, which he had contrived, during their long colloquy, to lacerate and trample under foot in a style that would have been resented by the meekest of women. Since she lived in the nineteenth century, and since she had no ambition to be guillotined, or even sent to prison, Madame de Castelmoron abstained from putting poison into his broth ; but that he should be made to smart for his atrocious conduct seemed to her to be as indispensable as that she herself should preserve a placid and friendly exterior.

Consequently Raoul was entertained with the greatest care and kindness for another ten days at the château on the banks of the Loire, which he quitted at last with many heartfelt expressions of gratitude to its mistress. Consequently, also, an anonymous missive, written in a disguised hand and disfigured by numerous intentional blunders in grammar and spelling, was despatched to Miss Luttrell, whose address it had been no hard matter to obtain. A careless invalid who leaves his correspondence lying about, can scarcely expect to have secrets from his nurse.

At Hacombe Luttrell that year the early autumn was, as it not unfrequently is in the far west, a season of calms and hot weather. The equinoctials were coming ; but the winds seemed to be taking a rest in preparation for that annual outburst of fury ; the skies were clear and serene, the harvest had been gathered in

without a drop of rain, and Guy, who had come down to shoot his father's partridges, groaned over the labour of toiling up hill and down dale under so scorching a sun. Sir Robert, who was not feeling very well, declined to share his fatigues; economy being so imperatively necessary, no other sportsmen had been invited to stay in the house; so that Guy was fain to fall back upon the companionship of his sister, who often walked beside him, and with whom, on those occasions, he had several serious talks. Of his own disastrous matrimonial affairs, which she was anxious to discuss, he had little to say, giving her to understand that he had spoken his last word upon that subject; but he warned her with much earnestness against allowing herself to be led away by Clarissa's morbid notions.

'I don't suppose you want to be an old maid,' said he; 'I never met a woman who did. And if you begin by thinking that no man is good enough for you, you'll be apt to end by thinking any man good enough. One has seen that happen before now. Besides, the whole thing is such utter nonsense. Take my advice, and when you meet a man whom you care for, be satisfied if he's a gentleman and a good chap. Don't you get making inquiries about whether he has been what you call "dissipated" or not. If you mean to go in for that sort of thing, you'll have to confine your attention to curates—and Heaven knows whether even curates are as good as they look. I shouldn't think they were. The average man, you may depend upon it, will be all right, so long as his wife doesn't play the fool, and the average man is bound to have had experiences which he doesn't care to talk about to his wife.'

Such speeches as this were not wholly unwelcome to Madeline; although, as a matter of principle, she believed Clarissa to be in the right and her brother to be in the wrong. The truth was that she was secretly eager to pardon one whom she had pronounced to be unpardonable; and if—as seemed to be the case—the male standard of morality was so different from, and so very inferior to, the female, perhaps he ought not to be blamed for having been what others are. Possibly, too, that odious newspaper story had been exaggerated, or even false. Her heart was further softened when her mother made casual mention, one day, of Raoul de Malglaive's letter, saying that it had really been very pretty of the young fellow to write and that she hoped they would meet him at Pau when they returned thither.

‘He threatens to betake himself to Tonquin or Sénégal,’ added Lady Luttrell, laughing; ‘but I don’t think he was very serious about that, and I have told him that he owes it to his poor old mother to abandon such fantastic ideas.’

Now it was impossible to suppose that M. de Malglaive would ever have entertained such ideas unless he had been in low spirits, and it did not seem altogether probable that he had written to Lady Luttrell for the sole purpose of telling her how sorry he was that Sir Robert’s political party had been left in a minority. Madeline, therefore, sometimes permitted herself to wonder whether, after all, she was going to be as lonely and miserable for the rest of her days as she had made up her mind to be; and the arrival, one morning, of a foreign letter, bearing the Tours postmark, caused her to catch her breath and pause irresolutely for some seconds before tearing it open.

Alas! the contents were not what she had expected, nor was the signature, at which she at once glanced, that of Raoul de Malglaive. His name, indeed, occurred frequently in the four clumsily written pages which Madeline hastened to read through, but the writer, who signed herself ‘*Une Malheureuse*,’ had nothing good to say of him. Not without reluctance, she averred, had she decided to place herself in communication with Mademoiselle Luttrell; but, as she had reason to believe that a heartless libertine had designs upon the happiness of that young lady, her conscience would not permit her to remain silent. Statements—some of which were true, but most of them false—followed; Madame de Castelmoron, ‘of whose house he has now been an inmate for three weeks, under the pretext of having been taken ill there,’ was not spared; in conclusion, Madeline’s anonymous correspondent remarked, ‘He will tell you, no doubt, that he loves you, and I do not say that he will be insincere; he has so many loves! But, humble as I am, it does not suit me to go shares in such favours, and I think, mademoiselle, that you will feel as I do.’

We are all agreed, as a matter of theory, that people who are afraid to sign their names are unworthy of a moment’s attention; but theory, unfortunately, is one thing and practice is another. Had Madame de Castelmoron been present in the flesh (as she was in the spirit) when her little dose of poison reached its destination, she would doubtless have felt herself fully and satisfactorily avenged.

(To be continued.)

MEN AND MANNERS IN FLORENCE.

ABOUT three visitors of every six who come to fair Florence go straight to a pension. The city may be said to be made up of pensions and antiquities, with flower-girls and royal personages thrown in. Such an error of conduct is therefore excusable. For an error it certainly is, if you propose to feast instructively on mediæval relics, paintings, and memories, and study the modern Florentines into the bargain. I know nothing more distracting mentally than the drama of an Italian pension, in which a couple of dozen individuals of three or four continents, of incongruous ideals and different ages and stations (from dukes and duchesses—Italian—to retired butchers), herd together at one dinner-table, and in the drawing-rooms devote themselves to gossip and love-making. The pension is, in fact, just the stage of a theatre; and the life in it makes up a variety of plays, in which tragedy and farce predominate. This is especially true of Florence when the almond-trees are in blossom and the streets are perfumed by the flower-girls.

And so, as a start, I went to a humble inn in Shoemaker Street, deferring my pension experiences for a week or two. I did not regret it. The common Italian is a much-misunderstood person in England, where we form wrong ideas of the nation from the organ-grinders and ice-cream men it sends us. He is honest, amiable in the extreme, and as natural as Dame Nature herself. At this plebeian inn they gave me no fewer fleas than I ought to have expected at a 'lira' the night. But their civility was unbounded, even as their linen was clean. My window looked across unblushingly at the window of a room occupied by a couple of genial young women, who slept, worked at bonnet-making, ate, and sang as if they really rather enjoyed than disliked my involuntary supervision of them. My landlord was proud of me—he said so, never before having had an English 'Excellency' under his modest roof. He himself sat up to receive me when I stayed out late at nights, and smiled, even through his yawns, as he carried my candle for me. And the dark-eyed chambermaid who brought me my coffee of a morning could not have been more

engagingly gentle and devoted if she had had to thank me for her life and ten times as many accompanying blessings as she possessed. Her 'buon giorno, Sinny,' or her 'buona sera,' as we clashed on the narrow stairs, was always emphasised by a winning smile of the kind one does not get out of King Humbert's happy realm.

Thus loosely tethered, I could do as I pleased in all essential matters. In fifteen days I had dined at fifteen restaurants and supped at fifteen others. I also made acquaintance with about a score of cafés. That is seeing life in Florence with a vengeance. At any rate, it taught me to lift my hat with ease in entering and leaving these public places of entertainment. The home-staying Englishman may mock at this simple courtesy, but to my mind it is somewhat educative, and the more so that it is violently against the grain of the British temperament. The flower-girls also were one of the salutary trials of the life. Perceiving that I did not wear a Florentine countenance, they invariably made me their victim. In the middle of my macaroni, for instance, one of them would assault me with a bunch of violets and a pin. Covering her attack with a smile all over her brown countenance, and showing a score of eager white teeth, she would fasten the nosegay in my coat ere I could say five serious words in opposition. The other guests beheld the encounter with pleased impartiality. Life in Florence is all pictorial. I thus contributed a commonplace yet bright little vignette on my own account. And so it happened that regularly as I dined was I adorned with flowers.

It was the same with the mandoline players. How excellently these sweet strummers aid digestion in this city of the Medici! They and their stringed toys appear everywhere. Indeed, the more obscure the eating-house the more systematic their visitations. The music dignifies the viands. Not always was the wine good, nor the cutlet *à la milanaise* of the tenderest; but one forgets these defects in the plaintive spectacle of a white-bearded sightless mandolinist led into the room by an angel-faced (though not very clean) little girl, to add the sauce of harmony to the meal. I have seen a warm-hearted neighbour shed tears over his 'carciofi' during the melody, and another let his meat go cold while he beat time to the musician's strumming. The Florentines are all sensibility—or nearly. Touch their hearts and you may be sure you have touched their pockets also, though there may be naught inside these. For my part, I reckoned the copper to the

mandolinist as an integral part of my dinner bill. The flower-girl and the waiter were the only inevitable extras.

Afterwards it was gay to go into the lively streets with the post-prandial cigar; to roam recklessly for a while among palaces, churches, and slums; or to watch the stars and lamplights in the Arno from Taddeo Gaddi's quaint old bridge, with its shops and crowds of passengers. The evening air here in spring is often keen, thanks to the snow on the distant mountains; but it always reaches the lungs with a 'cachet' of purity upon it that the dead dogs visible in the Arno by daylight may appear upon the whole to belie. The pensions and hotels of Lung' Arno after the dinner-hour exhale an air of fascinating frivolity. One beholds illuminated drawing-rooms and gleaming shoulders, and there is a clang of merry voices. Music, too, floats hence towards the gliding water, and whispers descend from amorous couples nestled in the balconies, with hearts steeped in the romance of their surroundings. And music ascends also to these love-makers; for the omnipresent mandolinist of the street finds them out, and serenades them one by one as fervently as a thrush its mate. The musician's words are often as torrid as his notes. It is convenient. The discreet wooer has only to murmur in the ears of his loved one that his sentiments are precisely those tongued by the melodious rascal below.

Your typical Florentine is epicurean to the toe tips. His enthusiasms and yearnings are quite other than those of the northerner. Give him two francs a day for life and he will toil no more. He may be a marquis, and seventh or eighth in direct descent, but he will be content to forego the assertion of his rank so he may thenceforward enjoy the priceless boon of leisure and independence. His leisure he will dissipate at the café, with perhaps two three-halfpenny sweet fluids per diem; and you may study the effect of his independence in his courtly manners, even though his hat be worn at the brim and his coat-back be deplorably shiny. He is a pellucid brook—shallow as you please, yet engaging for his pellucidity. As he sits on the red velvet cushions and looks forth at the carriages and gowns of fashion in the Via Tornabuoni, he shows no trace of envy on his open countenance. What, in effect, have these rich ones more than he, save the *ennui* of modishness and the indigestion of high feeding? The monuments and blue skies of Florence (not to mention the glorious or stirring memories of its history) are rather more his than theirs.

And it is such ineffable bliss to be able to twiddle one's thumbs and defy all and everything (except death) to upset one's sweet tranquillity of soul. Call it vacuity instead of tranquillity, and no harm will be done.

Through sitting twice or thrice as his neighbour, I came to know one of these remarkable men. His salutations at meeting and parting were of the benignest, but he had nothing to say between times. He sat with his hands folded in his lap, looking as happy as a pretty maid at her first ball. Now and then he would comb his hair and moustache with an ivory pocket-comb, and now and then he would use a tooth-quill. Occasionally he hummed a popular air. His daily beverage was lemon and water. When he lifted his arm I could see the bare skin through the parting of his shirt. In the forenoon, towards evening, and well on in the night, I caught him in the thrall of the same giddy diversion. Yet he was always radiant with innate felicity. And there were others, many, like him.

This devotion to the pleasant shadows of propriety is quite a characteristic of certain of the Florentines. They skim the cream of existence, and care little or nothing for what lies underneath. Why should they distress themselves with doubts or unattainable ambitions? they seem to inquire with their ingenuous, unwrinkled countenances. The thing to do is to live easily. That achieved, all worth achieving is achieved. This explains much in modern Florence that has raised the furious ire of more or less illustrious stranger-sojourners in her laughing midst. Our great Ruskin writes of the 'Devil-begotten brood' of the Florentines of our day. They 'think themselves so civilised, forsooth,' he proceeds, 'for building a Nuovo Lung' Arno and three manufactory chimneys opposite it, and yet sell butcher's meat, dripping red, peaches, and anchovies side by side: a sight to be seen.' The authoress of 'Moths' also has not yet wearied of fusillading the tough hide of the city's rulers for their apparent disregard of the first principles of æstheticism. But Florence will put up with worse and far more comprehensible abuse than this, so it may still sip its wine and twiddle its thumbs beneath the soft mantle of its all-enveloping self-esteem. The very raging of its celebrated aliens on such subjects is a tribute to its own beauty, which nothing can mar irretrievably. Besides, is there not a necessary difference between the children of Arno's banks and these their revilers from other lands? The latter are the slaves, the blind

champions, of Art. Your born Florentine knows better than to worry himself about the crumbling of one fresco among many, or the incongruity of whitewashing what is called 'an immortal piece of stone-work.' Due observation of these racial dissympathies is convincing on one point. In all physical struggles between the north and south the latter must go to the wall. There is a stern, almost ferocious pertinacity and strength in the Teuton that the mild or hectic self-gratulatory enthusiasms of the modern Latins cannot stand against.

One day I went with a fellow-countryman to the Church of S. Spirito. It was the saint's festival. Outside, the morning was hot and still, and you could hear the larks over the red earth and blossoms of the distant fields and gardens. Across the church's threshold, however, all was yellow with candle-light. The atmosphere was sickly sweet and hot, thanks to incense, flowers, warm humanity, and the multitude of untimely tapers. A woman knelt by my side and prayed audibly for certain desirable blessings, with her bright eyes upon the richly garbed officiating clergy by the altar. Two or three amazed tourists stood and contemplated the candles, the worshippers, and the clergy through opera-glasses, passing remarks between their views. I heard a British youth whisper 'What rot!' none too quietly. Anon the function at the altar reached its zenith. The crowd of worshippers seemed to hold their breath. What was coming next? Why, this: the reverend bishop showed symptoms of fatigue or suffocation. Instantly two of the lesser clergy relieved him of his mitre; the one then respectfully wiped his episcopal brow, while the other, with the palm of his hand, smoothed his sleek hair at the back. Afterwards the function proceeded. In the evening this same church was decorated externally also with countless lights to its weather-vane. There was no wind to spoil the garish spectacle. But there was a vast assemblage of the faithful and the dilettanti in the space about the church, and an infinity of tokens of joy. The word 'Bella!' was bandied from tongue to tongue, and from their eyes you would have thought the people had received a national and personal boon of the highest kind.

They were the lineal ancestors of those impulsive men and women who, six hundred and more years ago, when Cimabue's Madonna was ready for its shrine, escorted it, with incredible rejoicing and the music of trumpets, from his studio to the church

of S. Maria Novella. They recognised in this sad-faced Virgin the source of new emotions ; and as such it was exceedingly welcome, quite apart from its religious character.

So nowadays, when a monarch or two or three come to the city, their majesties are received in the piazza of the railway station with outcries of joy that may well deceive the visitors into fancying that they have some especially amiable quality which endears them to the Florentine heart. Nothing of the kind, in fact. They beget a new emotion, that is all. To the southern nature this is as if handfuls of gold and silver were to be scattered from a carriage. Nay, it is even more ; for in the scrambling for the coins some may receive injuries provocative of emotion of quite another kind—and language in keeping. One evening, when I returned to my inn in Shoemaker Street, I found Cecca, the maid, voluble and pretty with excitement. 'I have seen your dear Queen, sir,' she said ; and then she described the sight, with tears of rapture in her eyes. The innkeeper also referred to my country's sovereign as 'la cara regina.'

The same sensibility on such an occasion pervades the city in all its parts, from the itinerant shirt-seller (who shows you his goods in a café) to the municipal rulers. These at once seize on the pretext for public revels. They issue leaflets in which the citizens are implored to be conscious of the honour done them by the presence in their midst of these 'august personages.' There is to be, for example, a Battle of Flowers on a certain Sunday, with illuminations to follow. The citizens and others who will hang out carpets and flags from their windows, and adorn their vehicles (or even the chaises they may hire for that purpose) with flowers in as tasteful a manner as possible, will oblige the municipality and at the same time do their own hearts good in the recollection that they are pleasing royalty. The result is admirable. One spends an intoxicating afternoon in streets strewn with violets, apple-blossom, and lilies, and sees a thousand pretty girl-faces in the cars as happy as the blue May sky overhead.

A race meeting in the park by the green Cascine shows us something more of the Florentine nature. Save among the wealthy sprigs of nobility and others who have the doubtful advantage of foreign travel, there is no betting. The horses run as best they can through the lush grass of the course, and the people clap their hands. It is a spectacle pure and simple ; and

it is also the glad occasion of other spectacles, such as Punch and Judy, the feats of acrobats, and the fine clothes of fashion. The rich young men of Florence make themselves rather ridiculous in their high collars, primrose-yellow gloves, and legs clad in leather from the knees. They also excite the derision of the couple or so of enterprising British bookmakers who cry the odds in their midst in English. For they are chary of their five-lire pieces, and do not lose with grace, even as they express themselves somewhat queerly in their business transactions in a tongue not their own. But they are not specimens of the true-born Florentine. Their inherited nature has got more than a little adulterated. The very dogs at their high heels have been beaten into a mood that compels them to ape the *sang froid* that is believed to be a feature of the British dog as of the Englishman. They are totally unlike the ordinary dog of Florence, which capers and barks and wags its tail in the grass and flowers of the park with all the vivacious 'abandon' of its master or mistress.

Between the unspoiled high-born Florentine and the ordinary native there is comparatively little difference on all material points. The one has more money than the other—that is about all. He has a heart of just the same size, and is just as willing to let his heart be the monitor of his actions. From vulgar pride he is gloriously free. John Evelyn, who was here in 1644, makes a note of the conduct of the Grand Duke, who sold wine in the basement of the Pitti Palace and was not ashamed to do so: 'wicker bottles dangling over even the chiefe entrance into the Palace, serving for a vintner's bush.' It does one good to think of such condescension, assuming, as one well may, that the wine was of fair quality. But Florence has never been disrespectful towards the tradesman since the days of the Medici, with their pawnbroker's sign for a coat of arms. She remembers, too, that more of her geniuses were lowly born than of lofty parentage, and she loves geniuses for the rare emotions with which they provide her. These must, however, be of the first order of great men. Commonplace cleverness is scarcely more than respectable here; and the mere clever person (man or woman) who makes a tiresome claim for recognition as a genius in Florence is likely to become only a butt for the glib jests that fall as easily from Florentine tongues as courtly phrases.

I was privileged to bear a letter of introduction to a certain Countess well to the front in society here. She received me with

the grace one expects in Florentine ladies. But almost her first words were astonishing.

'I hope you are not intellectual, Mr. —,' she said, with rather an anxious smile. Her daughter and the young Count, her son, also smiled.

Having assured her that I was nothing of the kind, she sighed with relief. And yet she herself was distinctly intellectual, which made the matter seem a trifle odd. The truth was she had but just said 'A rivederci!' to one of the lights of English literature, who had, she confessed (and so did her daughter), bored her in a quite pitiable manner. The daughter was cruel enough to compare the poor gentleman to a cloud. 'One does not want clouds in May,' she added. The young Count (an unobtrusive adolescent) agreed. And then, I am afraid, some rather unkind censures were passed upon certain others of my country people as we drank our tea and looked at the sunlight on the orange trees in the little garden upon which the room opened. I had to congratulate myself that I had gained my footing on the sober grounds of mediocrity.

To recommend oneself in Florence it is necessary to be volatile and unpretentious. It isn't at all necessary to be a judge of pictures and statues. This, upon the whole, is a mercy, for Professor Ruskin has made it hard for the average Philistine to express an opinion about Florentine works of art without avowing his own ignorance. Praise Florence in a general manner, and you will win the hearts of the Florentines. This is a simple and easy programme.

As for the leisured young men of the city, these devote themselves strenuously to but a couple of aims: the garnishing of their own dear persons and the pursuit of fair ladies. In the former particular they are not more eccentric than their peers elsewhere. But in their amorous adventures they are wonderful. One with whom I was acquainted was possessed by three infatuations at once. The ladies in question were entire strangers to him, but he knew their names, their circumstances, the hotels at which they were staying (with mammas, papas, or big brothers), and the shops they patronised. He was deterred by no false modesty from raising his hat to them whenever he met them in the Via Tornabuoni (his favourite lounge) and smiling his sweetest. He had tried a *billet-doux* on two of them, but had received no answer. He admitted that so far he had not had encouragement from any one of the three; yet he was far from despondent. The

most beautiful of them was soon to have a birthday (he had learnt that fact from the subsidised *portiere* at the hotel—Heaven knows how), and he proposed to spend ten lire on her in a magnificent bouquet, in the midst of which there was to be a note containing an eloquent declaration of his heart's passion. He said he was sure he should succeed sooner or later with one of the three, because he had so often before succeeded under similar circumstances. When I mentioned the perils he so audaciously faced at the hands of wrathful parents and brothers, he shrugged his shoulders in contempt of such petty obstacles.

'Amico mio,' he remarked, with the air of a Solon, 'between two hearts that love there is always a way.'

The Briton is disposed to laugh to scorn such barefaced impertinence in the Florentine youths. But not infrequently impudence gains the day. A lamentable instance of this occurs to my mind. The victim was a convent-bred American girl, visiting Florence with her mother. She was beautiful, with strange light-brown eyes, a coquettish demeanour mysteriously out of keeping with the manners one is disposed to believe are inculcated in convents, and a sufficiency of dollars. The rascal who wrecked her was precisely one of these young ruffians of the Via Tornabuoni. He was a count, of course. They are all that, at least. He bored his way into her young heart with the assiduity of a bookworm and the singleness of purpose of a ferret. When she and her mother ate tarts in the swell confectioner's shop near the club, he also was there, with sad, wistful eyes. He won the driver of their hired car to slip something into her hands from 'il Signor Conte.' He bribed the porter at the pension where they were staying, and so established a channel for his love-letters—on superb thick paper embellished by an insidious gilt coronet. And after a fortnight's wooing of this kind, he got so far that the girl was not unwilling to sit at the open window of her ground-floor room and accept his smiles and greetings from the roadway, and even his letters. The affair ended in a wedding, and a year later in a divorce. This precious count, like so many others of his kidney, was a mere adventurer. The tale of his iniquities would astonish a world used even to the reports of our home divorce proceedings. While I write, I have before me one of his letters to this unfortunate girl. He takes credit in it for the ardour of his Italian heart and the eternity of its passion. But it is a pity some one did not pinch the life out of him as a babe ere he began his

career of blind brutish subservience to the dictates of this same heart.

Since the time of the 'Decameron,' love or the semblance thereof has played what one may term an inordinate part in Florentine life. Let the visitor be on his guard when he comes to this beautiful city, with its Fair Ladies' Street and its expansive smiles; and let him be so especially if he have with him a susceptible and pretty wife, sister, or daughter whom he wishes to leave Florence with her affections in much the same state as when she first walked, open-eyed and eager, among the pictures and antiquities of the place. In one of the city's enchanting cemeteries you may read the following epitaph under the marble bust of a girl—'Born for heaven. After eighteen years of life and forty days of love, fled to her home.' These words are an epitome of more than one young life upon which Florence has brought the first rough shock of disillusionment. Taine says of the Florentines that they are '*actifs sans être affairés*.' It is a significant phrase. The late lamented Dr. Watts could have given us a fine didactic stanza or two on such a text in such a city.

I learnt more on this subject when I left the inn in Shoemaker Street and took up my abode in one of the Lung' Arno pensions. There were no fleas here, and the furniture in my room was a charming study in green and gold. From my window, instead of a couple of absorbed little milliners, I looked upon a barrack exercising ground. The bugling was rather a nuisance at times, but the strong colours of the troops, the tight breeches of the lieutenants and captains in command, and their resonant voices were not altogether a change for the worse. And, though the pension was of the best class, it did not need a lynx eye to see that a good deal of an interesting kind was going on in it.

There were about fifty of us. Of course we included six or seven unattached English spinster ladies with white hair who knew all that was worth knowing about the rest of us. Also there were two German families; the one from Hamburg, the other headed by a baron and baroness from some small Schloss. Americans, two English parsons and their wives, a newly married and very modest pair from London, a marchese from Naples, two Roman counts, a Dutchman, and a round dozen others made up the housefull. Every room in the pension was occupied, and the dinner-table was a sight to warm the heart of the signora who ran the pension.

I never breathed such an atmosphere of ill-suppressed antagonisms as in this establishment. To me, as unattached as the spinsters themselves, it was highly diverting when I was in the humour to amuse myself at the expense of poor human nature. At table I sat between a parson's wife and the eldest daughter of the Hamburg merchant. The latter was a fine statuesque young woman and very candid in certain matters. She could not bear the daughter of the German baron, whose manners were so much more polished than her own, and she liked better to whisper about the girl's deficiencies and pride (so she regarded it) than to discuss the churches and pictures she had visited *en famille* in the course of the day, Baedeker scrupulously in hand. She was also much put about by the extraordinary number of frocks in which one of the American girls indulged. That, too, she considered bad form, and she asked her stout father if he did not think a mere half-dozen gowns per lady made up enough travelling luggage. Papa said, 'Ach, yes,' very decidedly. Nor did the fair Hamburger like the powder on certain faces. 'It is only when they require it that they use it,' she told me—a statement not so self-evident as it may seem. She said much more when we were in the drawing-room of evenings; and sometimes she said it in the privacy of one of the pension balconies, towards which she loved to steal when the stars were very bright and there was mandoline music underneath more moving than the piano flourishes indoors. For, though critical in company, she was not devoid of enthusiasm when the right time offered. Being the daughter of a practical man and a German, she contrived not to waste any of the impressions made upon her by the sunny south. It is bold in a man to pass judgment upon a girl, but I believe this Hamburg maiden was a downright good lass in spite of her prejudices and limitations—perhaps, indeed, because of them. There were times subsequently when I thought of profiting by her father's and mother's warm invitation to visit them at their villa on the Elbe. But I have not yet used the opportunity.

The parson's wife also was not above being divertingly critical of our company. Several times, however, her husband pulled her up in her remarks with a gentle 'Hush, my dear!' of horror, though it was as plain as could be that in his heart he thought her none too severe.

I made friends with one of the spinster ladies, a dear old soul with snow-white hair brushed high from her forehead. She re-

called Carmen Sylva's royal words in one of her novels: 'White hairs are the flakes of foam which cover the sea after a storm.' For I know not how many successive years she had been accustomed to spend the spring months in Florence. Thus she had all the city's gossip at her tongue's end, and delighted to tell it in dribblets to my sympathetic ears. It was she who first discerned that the young Dutchman was in love with the prettiest of the American girls; and it was from her that I learned of the progress of this little love affair between two people, each ignorant of the other's language, and none too well acquainted with Italian. There was a scare one day in the pension vestibule. The Dutchman had proposed and been treated rather badly by the young lady's mamma. The scene was between the two ladies. The next morning the Dutchman was absent. He had, said my venerable informant, gone to Venice 'to recover his senses.'

The one duke in our company was an interesting personage. He was stout and about fifty. Far from communicative as a rule, he seemed, like my spinster friend, to find his pleasure mainly in calm contemplation of his neighbours. However, one evening he and I smoked cigarettes together on a lounge, and he confided to me that 'these English are a bizarre nation!' He took me for a Frenchman. I did not undeceive him, and coaxed him to continue. And then, after a while, he amazed me by hinting that he thought a certain one of my countrywomen in the pension a sufficiently handsome lady. Fat and fifty though he was, and possessed of a large dark duchess with a moustache, he had proved susceptible to the charms of the wife of one of the clergymen. But he was philosophic withal, and nourished himself on no delusions. 'She appeals to me,' he said, 'like a portrait I saw in one of the galleries this morning. Nothing more, parole d'honneur,' and then he laughed a short dry laugh and puffed blue smoke into the air.

There was also an Oxford gentleman who was wont, for his accent's sake, to talk with the countrypeople beyond the Santa Croce district of the city. He declared that the purest Tuscan was to be heard there, and that they used pretty much the same phraseology as Boccaccio wrote. He kept himself serenely above the transient bickerings and drama of the pension, and what time he did not give to the galleries and churches he gave to a very big book. It was edifying to see him thus engrossed of an evening, when music, love-making, and gossip held the ascendant on

all sides of him. The duke said he did not know what to make of that kind of man. But for my part I fancied he might be right to hedge himself about with his intellectuality. There was a certain grand duke here who, when he travelled, always carried about with him Raphael's 'Madonna del Cardinello,' now in the Uffizi Gallery. That, too, was perhaps an ennobling, or at least a protective, proceeding.

The pension served its turn with me, as well as with the kindly signora who owned it. At any rate it was never tedious, and it was always a notable contrast to such places of pilgrimage as the monastery of S. Marco and Michael Angelo's tombs of the Medici. The past is so very dead in Florence that one is apt the more therefore to enjoy even the vibrating sense of actuality in its present. On the rare occasions when I yearned for an evening soporific in contrast with the pension's drama, I had but to go to the theatre or to my favourite humble café, the Antica Rosa, where Giovanni the waiter passed his spare minutes in playing cards with the gentle lady who sat at the counter and smiled on her clients as they came and went.

JUST A FREAK.

I.

THE other night I played the impulsive fool once more, and it landed me in a bit of a bother.

We had tickets for the stalls in the theatre, to see one of Ibsen's plays—'The Mutton Sausage,' I think the thing was called; and fine silly bosh it was. Not that the others went to see it. They couldn't or wouldn't go, after all. But it seemed such a sell to waste four tickets in that way, and so I went all by myself.

The fact is, I expected to see Ernie Grey there. Ernie and I were great chums at Eton, and it's awfully jolly to be going to the same college at Cambridge.

I positively yawned through that 'Mutton Sausage.' If it hadn't been for the smokes between the acts, I'd never have had the patience to sit it out, especially as Ernie wasn't to be seen anywhere. You never can rely on Ernie; that's the worst of him.

However, it came to an end at last, and I slipped into my cloak. There was rather a heavy crowd going out. I raised several sets of strong language from the dowagers because I trod on their trains. Serve them right, say I, for wearing such things.

When I was on the pavement, I hesitated. Was it, I asked myself, worth while trying to hunt up Randolph at his club? He'd stand me a soda and something if I could find him there; but, on the other hand, if I missed him the walk would be a horrid grind for nothing.

I was thinking it over like that, and standing close up to the door of a carriage, when I heard a fellow say almost in my ear, 'Here he is, m' lady!'

It was a footman, with what seemed to me a most lovely girl on his arm. I liked the curve of her cheeks immensely, and the action of her outstretched hand was also very taking.

What do you think happened next?

The lady tossed her cloak loose, pitched it over my shoulders, and said:

'You naughty boy, Raymond. Why didn't you stay to help me out?'

'I—I really——' I began.

'Oh, don't make excuses. Jump in quickly and atone for it.'

'Yes, sir,' added the lackey behind me, 'they're waiting for us to move.'

The fellow not only gave me a leg up, so to speak, but he pushed me inside the carriage in a way I'd like to have boxed his long ears for.

Anyhow, there we were; her ladyship (whoever she was) and I, side by side, and the horses getting up steam at every yard.

'Upon my word,' I exclaimed, 'there's some mistake——'

'No mistake at all, you selfish cousin,' was the patronising reply. 'You did it on purpose. I haven't the least doubt you devoted yourself to following some pretty girl. But it was *not* chivalrous of you, Raymond, indeed it was not. So early in our acquaintanceship, too! Are all the boys at Eton like that?'

Well, this settled me again. Wasn't it a coincidence that her Raymond should also be an Eton fellow? I wondered whose house he was in. But I didn't know any fellow of the name of Raymond. Rather a nice name, Raymond!

'No,' I said, 'of course they aren't. We don't get any practice there.'

Her ladyship laughed a silvery little laugh. I wished there was more light inside the carriage. As it was, she didn't turn her face towards me at all, but seemed to be looking straight before her. It was a trifle queer, though not anything like as queer as my situation.

'I didn't know you had so distinctly the making of a Lothario in you,' she said.

'Nor I,' I replied. 'But might I inquire where we are going?'

'Going! Why home, of course. And when you have had a little supper you shall go on to your father's. You'd like some supper, Raymond?'

'Certainly I should, but——'

'Oh no, you needn't be alarmed. We won't give you any mutton sausage. Was that what you were going to say?'

'No, it was not,' I answered indignantly.

'Tell me,' said her ladyship, 'did the characters look as foolish as their dialogue?'

'Well now, what did *you* think?' I retorted, naturally unwilling to give myself away.

'What should *I* know about their looks?' she asked quite mournfully.

'Why shouldn't you?'

'Raymond!'

She turned her face towards me at last, and the reproach in her expression made me feel that I was a brute.

'Do you forget things so soon?' she asked. 'Do you forget that I am all but blind?'

Now that staggered me. I don't know whether I most hated myself or pitied her.

'I'm horribly sorry,' I said. 'But please let me explain matters to you, and afterwards you shall do just as you think best with me.'

However, she would do no such thing. She put one of her pretty hands awkwardly towards my cheek and stroked it, and suddenly rattled into a criticism of 'The Mutton Sausage' that lasted until the carriage stopped. Mr. Ibsen would not have liked to hear what she said about his play.

In the meantime, I pondered how to get out of the scrape I had got myself into.

Should I slip away by the off side of the carriage when it stopped, or should I first see this blind young lady into her house?

The matter was really decided for me, which was in a sense comforting, for I do hate to make up my mind to a thing.

We stopped. I fumbled at my door and couldn't get the handle to work.

Then the other door opened, and a 'Jeames' stood to attention by the step.

'Look after the cloak, Raymond,' she said to me. 'It is much too warm a night to have worn it.'

'All right,' I said, and that is how I came to follow her across the threshold of that house in Gloucester Place.

'It's a case of supper here after all,' I confided to myself, not altogether ill-pleased, and upon the whole somewhat pleasantly excited by the adventure.

A fellow doesn't come of an army stock, I suppose, without rather liking to put himself into a hole, just to see how he's going to get out of it.

II.

But I oughtn't to have been such a fool. The bungle had gone quite far enough, and it was like me not to have seen that it was so.

The house looked all right inside—as comfortable as could be; and I was just pulling myself together for a little more cheek when the man at the door set to and stared at me. He stared still more when her ladyship spoke.

‘We can hardly expect the Earl in yet, I’m afraid, Raymond,’ she said.

‘No?’ said I.

That was when the lackey stared most. The worst of it was that our eyes clashed at the same moment.

He made a step forward—I knew what was coming, of course.

‘If you please, m’ lady, Mr. Raymond is not with you,’ said the fellow.

I was starting to tell her all about it, with ten thousand apologies and so on, when a young woman put in *her* oar—her ladyship’s maid, as it happened.

‘I beg your pardon, my lady,’ said the damsel, ‘but have you the diamond cloak clasp?’

As she looked as if she wanted it, I had thrown my companion’s garment into her arms as soon as I saw her.

This wasn’t all, either.

From the end of the corridor, on one side of the hall, a tall old gentleman with white hair appeared and, coming quickly towards us, asked ‘Eugenia’ if she were tired, and then looked mighty stern at me.

I bowed my serenest, though I admit I felt queerish.

‘No, Ward,’ said her ladyship to the maid, ‘I haven’t got the clasp.’

‘Then it’s lost, your ladyship,’ exclaimed the girl.

‘Perhaps *you* have it, Raymond?’ was her ladyship’s retort, as she turned her dim eyes towards me.

‘If your lordship will be kind enough to listen to me,’ I said, with a cold shiver down the back (for the Earl’s expression was nasty), ‘I will try to explain how I come to be trespassing inside your lordship’s house.’

The Earl exchanged glances with the man, and the latter shut the door.

‘Be so good as to follow me,’ he said.

‘What is the matter?’ inquired Lady Eugenia, looking about her pathetically.

‘I fear your ladyship has been made a victim,’ said that fool

of a maid. 'He has been personating Mr. Raymond. He is a perfect stranger.'

Eugenia screamed : a musical scream.

'I do assure you——' I exclaimed.

But the Earl interfered.

'I repeat, Sir, that I will thank you to follow me,' he said. 'And you too, Carter.'

'It was just a freak,' I murmured, when I was among the Earl's books, which had a frightfully depressing appearance.

'You, a stranger, have accompanied my daughter from the theatre; have *dared* to do so?' he inquired stormily.

'She made the mistake first,' I said.

'What has that to do with it, Sir?'

'I admit that I did wrong.'

'Then there's the di'mond clasp, m' lord,' observed the man, in a deferential whisper. What would I not have given for the liberty to punch his impertinent head! Anyhow, I turned on him sharply.

'Do you imply, you rascal,' I demanded, 'that I am a thief?'

The Earl shrugged his shoulders, and his lips looked malicious.

'At any rate, I must trouble you,' he said, 'to turn out your pockets. Afterwards I shall be more able to understand events.'

I bit my lip, and said that my pockets were entirely at the service of the menial who pleased to examine them. For my part, I would not condescend to be even an accessory to my own exoneration.

'Do so, Carter,' said the Earl.

We Talbots can look fierce on occasion, I've always understood. This was about the most encouraging opportunity for a little family spirit to show itself that I've ever enjoyed; and I feel sure I glared at the Earl while his man approached me, with fingers to the front.

The Earl met me straight. There was not much charity in his soul, I saw.

And now imagine my situation when, at the first plunge, so to speak, Carter pulled forth from my waistcoat pocket a small brooch affair sparkling with diamonds.

'Here it is, m' lord!' he said, triumphantly.

The Earl touched a hand-bell.

'How the mischief it came there is more than I can say!' I stammered.

'You *need* say nothing more,' said the Earl. 'Your explanation is due to the magistrate. I do not want to hear it. Fetch a policeman.'

These last words were to the man who answered the bell.

'Take him away, Carter,' this obliging Earl continued, 'and give him into custody.'

'Yes, m' lord,' said Carter.

The fellow made as if he would touch me. This roused me again.

'If you or any of your class lay a hand on me I'll knock you down without more words,' I said. 'You may as well know it.'

The Earl rang again.

That meant another man.

'But,' I added, 'I'll go quietly, my lord, to any police court you please. For it's absurd to suppose that Reginald Talbot, one of the Shropshire Talbots, let me inform you, is just a commonplace peddling thief. I've got myself into this mess by being civil to a lady when invited. As for the brooch, I don't know anything about it. And that's all I do know about it.'

'You just come along without all this talk,' said Carter.

The two fellows closed up to me. I set my shoulders back, held up my nose, and, with a parting glance at the white-haired Earl, marched. As I marched, I suddenly bubbled into mirth. It was really too good, you know.

III.

There was a little snugger by the porter by the door. They took me there; 'Jeames' himself turning out into the hall, with his hands in his breeches pockets, to make way for us. He contemplated me jauntily, did 'Jeames.'

'You be advised, young man,' said Carter to me, 'and stop that larfin'.'

I took a chair by the fire and laughed on, not altogether happily though. It occurred to me that Randolph and two or three other fellows might have got home. In that case I should miss a good hand at 'nap.'

'Look here,' I said, 'I've left my card case behind, but I'll write down my address and give the man a sovereign who'll take a line there.'

My two keepers looked from me to 'Jeames' and then at each other.

'Anything else, young man?' asked Carter derisively.

'You're Walker, London, aren't you?' inquired the other, not without a certain admiration in his face that appealed to me.

'And you're all a parcel of idiots,' said I.

This caused a triple laugh. I was out of it.

'Nice specimen, aint he?' said 'Jeames.'

I fumbled into my pockets to feel if anything mysterious as well as a diamond clasp had found its way there. Only my cigarette case met my fingers. Instantly I yearned towards it.

'Do you mind if I smoke?' I asked. 'Your policeman's a long time coming.'

Carter said he was dashed. He looked it too, but quickly cooled down, and added—

'I like your smartness; I really can't help liking it. I'll answer any civil, natural sort of question you ask, but you can't smoke.'

'Thank you, I'm sure,' said I. 'Then what's your master's name, first of all?'

'Lord Loughborough.'

'Lord Loughborough, is it? Then Lord Loughborough's a——' Carter exclaimed 'Hush!' 'And you're another,' I hastened to add.

The bell rang and the knocker knocked.

It was the policeman, a red-faced individual, looking as they always do when they think they've a nice easy thing on.

'That's him,' said the man with him, pointing at me. I had moved with my guards to see what was coming.

The fellow had handcuffs ready. This fairly stirred my bile.

'I'll not have them on,' I yelled. 'I defy you or ten of you to put 'em on.'

A couple of maidservants and another man showed in the hall. The scene interested them, I reckon. It would have interested me if I hadn't been principal character in it.

'Ketch him behind,' whispered the dunderhead of a constable. But I had my back to the wall in next to no time.

'You "ketch" me behind if you can!' I remarked.

The man who had been sent for the police made a rush at me. I shinned him badly. I also shinned the constable. He was of the puffy sort, and bound not to stand much bustling. I resolved,

now that my blood was warm, to let fly at them anyhow. I could have fancied I was in a bully at the old school.

And I did let fly at them, too. They came all together, with their arms out like waxwork figures. I just ducked and laid about me anywhere, but chiefly above the belt.

The policeman got it in the wind, and even Carter didn't come off scot free.

Never, I should think, did the Earl of Loughborough's town house behold such a shindy.

The fellows stood off after this first round, the policeman nursing his stomach and gasping (swearing, too, I'm afraid), and Carter and one of the 'Jeameses' rubbing their legs.

One of the maids behind was laughing. I noticed that, and it cheered me.

And now out came the Earl again. What a face he had on, to be sure! Beerbohm Tree would have given a ten-pound note to see him.

'Good God!' he cried.

'The villain defies us all, m' lord!' stuttered Carter, holding his right leg stiffly.

'Yes, and he'll continue to!' said I. 'I'm not going to be carried to a police cell like a lamb, I can tell you, Lord Loughborough.'

You should have seen the Earl fume at this. I didn't care though. I was past caring for anything.

He strode towards us. 'Strode' is the very word for it.

'Open the door at once!' he bellowed.

'It'll make no difference,' I retorted.

The door was opened, and the brutes came at me again. I wasn't fully prepared, and this time they pinned me sure enough. A fellow of my age (getting on for nineteen) can't do much with a grown-up man gripping each of his legs and arms.

'Now out with him!' ordered the Earl.

But it wasn't to be, after all.

Almost as soon as the door was opened a young spark came up and got one foot on the steps.

'Hullo!' said he, when he saw what was going on, 'what's all this about?'

It was Giffard of Mason's, by all that was merciful!

'Say, Giffard!' I cried, 'don't let these fellows make such a fool of me.'

I'll not forget in a hurry how well he did it too. He rammed in and parted me from two of them. I shook off the other two by myself.

'Thanks, old man,' I said, as I fell against one of the pillars of the Earl's porch.

In that moment it flashed to me: Giffard was the Lady Eugenia's Raymond.

'Do you know the Earl of Loughborough?' I asked him quickly.

'Rather,' said he, 'I'm his nephew. Come along in and let's hear all about it.'

The servants gave way in fine style now, and the constable looked an ass. We had only the Earl to tackle.

Nor did his lordship waste time.

'Who is this young man, Raymond?' he inquired, frowning so that you would think his skin must cut through.

'He's at Eton, uncle,' said Giffard, 'and the best "long behind" in the place.'

I hate being flattered. That was why I immediately mentioned Cameron, Grant, and Bentinck, whom some fellows think safer kicks than me.

'Rot!' said Giffard.

'It isn't for me to express a decided opinion,' I continued. 'I last, though, better than either of them.'

The Earl ejaculated something that sounded extraordinarily like a rhyme to 'ham.' I vow he did. Both Giffard and I glanced at him reproachfully; more in sorrow than in anger, I imagine.

The servants all slunk out of sight. Only the red-faced constable was left. He looked uneasy. I suppose he had heard of the Earl of Loughborough's temper, which, his nephew tells me, is notorious.

'May I,' inquired Giffard blandly, 'ask Talbot inside, uncle?'

The policeman touched his knobby forehead to the Earl and rudely interfered with a question of his own.

'I suppose I'm not wanted any more, your lordship?' he said.

'Go, you fool!' replied the Earl.

Giffard was beginning a second time, but I cut him short.

'My dear fellow,' I remarked, 'the Earl of Loughborough might say "Yes;" but I have a voice in the matter also. It's getting late. I don't feel like going inside again, many thanks.'

Giffard lurched one shoulder.

'Then that settles it. I'll stroll down the street with you, if you don't mind.'

'Do,' said I.

I asked the Earl's pardon as I crossed his threshold for a moment to pick up my hat, which had got mauled above a little; and then, with a bow and nothing more, I turned my back on that inhospitable mansion.

It was really too funny for anything to see how the Earl of Loughborough stood rigid and silent while we strolled off.

Then I told Giffard everything, and didn't he roar!

It was not altogether a laughable affair; nevertheless, I tried to snigger a little on my own account.

We stood backs against a lamp-post to see if there was anything to choose between us in height. There was nothing. My voice too is much in the same key (I believe they call it that) as Giffard's.

'Oh, yes, there's every excuse for my poor cousin Eugenia,' Giffard was agreeable enough to say.

'Any for me, too?'

'None, old man; none at all. And it's a heaven's blessing for you I chanced to have spent the day in Gloucester Place. Take warning and look sharp that the next lady not of your acquaintance, whose cloak you carry, doesn't have a valuable trinket to it ready to drop into your waistcoat pocket.'

After that well-turned sentence, I said 'Good night' to Giffard, having sworn him to secrecy about the adventure.

But he went back on his oath the next day. That is why I'm at such pains to tell the story in an unvarnished form.

As I expected, when I got home, I was too late for anything. They had all gone to bed except Randolph, and he was so grumpy that I couldn't stand five minutes of him. Wanted to know why I hadn't turned up an hour or two sooner. Wish I had, that's all.

A CITY OF SUFFERING.

It is a city lying within the Conqueror's city, fine old Caen, whose squalid streets are touched into worthiness by their churches with colour-flushed windows and stones carved long ago. The plenitude in these streets, not only of churches but of family rubbish-heaps, leads to the inference that the prayers of the Caennais absorb more time than do the punctilios of sanitation. The schoolgirl who stated that atmospheric air was composed of germs and small insects may perhaps have been a dweller in this Norman community, and in that case she came near being justified of her thesis. No stranger who suffers his nose to travel forth into the public highway undefended by smelling-salts, can harbour the smallest doubt of the need of hospitals in this place.

We all know well the story of the Conqueror's marriage with Matilda of Flanders, and how the twain snapped their fingers at remonstrant abbots and condemnatory councils, and lived awhile triumphantly in what the Church considered very naughty wedlock. But with the flight of a brace of years compunctions pricked, and the royal sinners devised each a solid expiation of their naughtiness. Thus at opposite poles of the good town of Caen arose the two penance-built churches, William's and Matilda's, the Abbaye aux Hommes and the Abbaye aux Dames, stony warnings to those who would plunge into matrimony without first considering tables of relationship; and round these two churches congregate nowadays the sick in body and mind. For the noble ladies of La Trinité, Matilda's Abbey, tend the wards in the hospital, whose park kisses their walls; and almost under the shadow of William's austere St. Etienne lies that wonderful composite house of mercy, the convent of Le Bon Sauveur, where many human miseries bring themselves to be healed and comforted. Thanks to its distinguished connections, the former foundation in earlier days seems to have been able to conduct itself with not a little flourish. Thus we read that in 1729 the citizens of Caen fired seven volleys of cannon to honour the arrival of a great lady as Abbess at La Trinité, and the thrifty-minded chronicler adds regretfully that they would not have fired more than three, but that they thought her sister, the Princess de Carignan, was with her. 'Noble dame Marie-Anne de Verus' made, however, but shabby return to the town of Caen for its lavishness in welcome and gunpowder. Little more than a year

later it was discovered that she was employing agents to smuggle large quantities of wine into the Abbaye. Wherefore there was some little unpleasantness with the authorities, and great heart-burnings resulted, and a still greater lawsuit. It was not surprising that the Caennais, accustomed to the amplitude and aristocratic methods of this royal sisterhood, should dub the struggling congregation of *Le Bon Sauveur*, in its baby days, '*le petit couvent*.' That it should ever have been thus named seems incredible to the visitor in a hurry, who begins at the wrong end, and, marvelling at the stinginess of convents in the matter of exits and entrances, has to circumambulate something like a mile of walls before reaching the gates. For '*le petit couvent*' is not only big but huge, and covers seventeen acres of the old town of Caen. This is little cause for wonder, since within its mighty walls of native stone two thousand motley humans suffer and work and pray. Here Napoleon's schoolfellow, the never too lucky Bourrienne, came to die. Here that gay dog, Beau Brummell, lived out the tattered remnant of his low-pitched life. Though, as the great doors opened before him, the old creditor-ridden Beau cried out in despair at entering what his mazed senses took to be a prison, yet it was here that he found the kindness which the world denied when the clothes supply failed, and debts took the place of money. Captain Jesse, in his '*Life of Brummell*,' tells how, at his entrance into the convent-asylum, the poor old Beau was helped to his rooms by Auguste, his friend's servant, and by one of the Sisters, whom, despite her holy robings, he insisted upon taking for Auguste's wife. Auguste was a lucky fellow, he remarked to the Sister in a burst of gallantry, as they went along, '*car vous êtes bien une jolie femme!*'

It was in 1731 that '*le petit couvent*' began its career, very quietly, with no flourish and no volleys of cannon, for it was a lowly born woman's venture. Anne Leroy was the daughter of an insignificant tradesman, who drove his little business in one of Caen's mean streets. She was brought up to earn her living as a dressmaker, but, being devoutly minded, she before long forsook her trade, and entered the convent at St. Lô, near Bayeux, hoping by this step to serve better both God and her fellows. For to the average woman in the France of olden days the path to devoted philanthropy led commonly through convent gates. The lavish vices and prejudices of the time barred to the ordinary woman of the world the wide field for work which lay open to secular sisterhoods. Thus when the altruistic passion touched the ex-needle-

woman, she in her St. Lô convent had to 'faire sa profession,' to take the three great vows which shear life of its fulness, before her career of fellow-service could begin. The motive which made her presently leave the convent; and go back to her native town, is left for our guessing. Certainly she, of all others, brought up from babyhood in its narrow filthy streets, must have known to the full the nameless horrors that lurked in them, the sicknesses that pained and the poverty that gnawed, and known too with a compassion born of fellowship. We are told that in 1733 the 'coqueluche,' that old-time cousin to influenza, ran riot in dirty Caen during Lent, and resulted in such an enfeebled plight of the inhabitants that it was found necessary to officially sanction the reopening of the butchers' shops.

Possibly it was some such plague and the rumours of misery radiating from it, that drew the devout Caennaise from her convent to help her fellow-townsmen. Whatever the cause may have been, Anne Leroy left St. Lô in 1731, and, going back to Caen, devoted herself to tending the sick and sad and suffering, and drew around her other women eager for the same pitiful task. 'Her sole idea,' as they say in the mighty convent that arose from her efforts, 'was to do as her Saviour had done on earth.' They lived in Vaucelles, these Sisters, in the heart of the city's poverty; they taught young girls, they visited the sick, they took into their own quarters poor lunatic women, and there ministered to them. And truly no more urgent work than this last could they have chosen, for in history there are few blacker blots of cruelty and ignorance than the old-time treatment of the insane. There were no Masters in Lunacy in Anne Leroy's days, no decent asylums, little compassion for madness, and less knowledge of its causes. A lunatic was a person of uncertain, inexplicable, and often dangerous habits. Society feared him, tucked him away somewhere out of sight with the aid of keys and chains, and passed by on the other side. In all probability this Gallio-like attitude meant for the lunatics a far greater sum of suffering than that involved in the impetuous treatment of a younger civilisation, with its duckings, and whippings, and like active but transitory measures. But whether or no the poor creatures found swift agony preferable to imprisonment, their history unfortunately leaves no doubt of the existence of both in great bounty, of horrors and barbarity unimaginable, of the deprivation of all that their dulled sense could grasp of life and its joys. In Caen the pillared Palais de Justice stands where once stood the old gaol,

part of which was known as 'La Tour des Foux.' Here were stowed away those wretched beings who were not as their fellows; here their days dragged out to years with a ghastly accompaniment of heavy chains, insufficient food, and lack of all things desirable. Kindness, consideration, pity—of these they probably knew less than wild beasts in captivity. Vincent de Paul had indeed preached, but Dr. Pinel had not yet practised. Wherefore Anne Leroy in her quiet way tried to build a seemly harbour for this human wreckage. She began, naturally, with the women, and with some success, apparently, for when the volcano of the Revolution burst, this little community, which it scattered with the rest, consisted of twelve Sisters and sixteen lunatic women. Owing to the disturbances of the Revolution, it was not till 1804 that the prosperous period of the Bon Sauveur Sisterhood began. Then their director, the Abbé Jamet, came to their assistance with no half-hearted aid, and obtained for them the larger premises of the Capucines, as numbers bade fair to increase. Doing as Christ had done on earth proved a widely comprehensive scheme, upon which secular authorities were in time brought to look favourably. A loan was granted, and the work grew.

The old building of the Capucines thus forms the nucleus of the present acreage of Le Bon Sauveur. It is a joy to artists' eyes, that low-built old quadrangle, with its age-tinted roofs and narrow cloisters, and grateful minglement of sun and shadow. In summer the begonia beds blaze amid the prim little walks, and heliotrope scents the air round the quaintly sheltered well whose pagoda-cover ever forbids entrance of the sunny glare. One side of the quadrangle is the nuns' common room—a grand space, rich in many windows, many chairs, and many portraits of sweet womanly faces, all uniformed in the ugly scapular that so surely kills the prettiness of the merely pretty. From all sides they look down on us, these honoured women, some old, some not so old, the 'mothers' of the convent who have gone to their rest. On one side of the fireplace hangs the portrait of Mère Leroy, a strong-featured, somewhat stern face, with more of command than of sweetness in it. There, too, is pictured the Abbé Jamet, benefactor and faithful co-worker, who shares the honours of the convent with its foundress. A tablet in the chapel of the male lunatics tells how for two years the good Abbé was paralysed, and was only cured by the healing touch of the Bishop of Bayeux, wherefore he built the chapel as a thank-offering, and died very soon after. So he lies ever among them, there in the little

garden chapel, a peaceful statued figure, with praying hands, bathed in a perpetual glory of golden light.

The Consul-General's loan, with its resultant larger premises, enabled the Sisters to give the lunatics better housing and treatment than had been possible in the old buildings. At the demolition of the Tour des Foux the mad folk were taken to the gaol at Beaulieu, and brought thence after a while to the kindly shelter of Le Bon Sauveur, where compassionate women followed the lead of the Paris doctor in forbidding chains, and neglect and cruelty were of the past. The lunatics were human beings once more. But the Sisters did not limit themselves to this one branch of good works. There are three schools within their walls: one for *demoiselles de famille*, one for middle-class girls, one for the youngsters of the poor folk of Caen. In the infirmaries the four resident doctors treat not only inmates, but whatsoever of broken limbs and casualties the surrounding Caennais bring to them. The Sisters go forth and nurse the poor, they distribute food and medicine to the needy, and carry their sympathy and kindly faces into the smelliest streets. As the great doors shut out the grimy Rue Caponnière, there comes a vision of a sunlit court of low buildings, catching a hint of tropic grandeur from the huge palms and yuccas which grow in wooden buckets, glorying in the glare. From among the palms a gate opens upon the quarters of the deaf-mutes, a cheery place enough, though rife with strange unhuman sounds. There are some sixty of them in all sizes, these bungled creatures to whom Mother Nature has been so strangely stingy. The Sisters labour patiently to bridge the gulf, and some with this their life-task have marred their faces and widened their silently speaking mouths at which the children stare with such intentness. The little ones' laboured answers come curiously, with unexpected catches of breath, and with tones and turns which show the undefrauded heirs of vocal ages that the small ears cannot listen to the small lips' strivings. To children of a larger growth are taught divers trades: they learn to be joiners, weavers, tailors, and what not. Both big and little take kindly to physical exercises, and a delight and joy to most, though possibly not to their more completely sensed neighbours, is the beating of a drum, which looks as though they instinctively sought to cheat the fate which condemned them to make less noise in the world than their fellows.

The little wicket swings behind us on the voiceless dwellers, and we are out among the palms again, and cross courts and

quadrangles bright with flowers, and cool cloistered walks and shady avenues. There, under the lee of the men's infirmary, goes a knot of blue-bloused inmates, interested and busy with their truck-load, their warder dressed even as they. Here in the shade saunter brightly dressed ladies, with a keen-eyed Sister in attendance. They might be taken for whole-minded were it not that their gait bewrayeth them, as is also the case with the little regiment of poorer women whom the Sisters are bringing to help in the great laundry. Specklessly clean are they, shady hats tied well under their chins, smiles on their meaningless faces; but their path zigzags, they are prone to halts and vacuous starings. Then the Sisters touch the lax arms gently and remind them of business, and they go forward again with large dragging steps. So we follow up through the mighty wooden washhouse, four wide stories of cleanliness, with their tenantry of steam and water and myriad pendant sheets and stockings. Peeping through a trapdoor we see under a cool arch below, framed as in a picture, the strong-armed women of the town who help their less competent fellows within the convent walls. Blue-bodiced, bent-necked, they kneel on the brink of the little Odon's shadowed ripples, and emptying basketfuls whiten in their hands, while behind them sits the quiet Sister, supervising, arranging, handing this or that, a black-robed figure whose face we see not. And turning back through the farmyard, with its orderly perspective of chewing cows, we reach at last the huge kitchens, where the faces of the army of Sisters redden amid stoves and boilers, where in cohorts and battalions the milk-puddings flaunt their little span, where the domestic coffee-pot stands six feet high, and the sight of the soup supply evolves disbelief in a parallel hunger. And on over the way into the bread-cutting room, where an amiable lunatic, bubbling with the importance of his mission, turns the machine which changes ponderous loaves into thin shreds for potage. Thence to the home of the said loaves, a russet wheaten glory from floor to ceiling, ponderous verily, but fleeting, for each hungry day swallows seven hundred of the stoutest. But the Titanic bakery replenishes gamely, for the monster proportions of its mixing-troughs seem to laugh at the little men who work them. Further on, the cider-press has a house to itself, and sunk steps lead to the cider's penultimate goal—two barrels of gigantic girth, whose inwards, we are told, are cleaned by no mere mop, but by several mortal men with mops, who spring-clean within these cider mansions at the dry season.

For since there are two thousand throats in the convent, even to the giantest cider-cask cometh every two months a dry season.

In time we reach the quarters of the women lunatics—airy rooms and corridors smelling of much soap and more summer air. For the milder paupers are little dormitories, plainly furnished with some half-dozen white-winged beds, and the warder Sister's stronghold tucked into the alcove next the peepholed door. The paying patients have their one or two private rooms, prettily furnished: here easy-chairs and costly hangings, there a lace-draped bed for the lady, and for the wild beast who occasionally gets the upper hand, lo! a strongly barred berth, where the beast may tear and worry and hurt nought till it becomes a lady again. 'Do you admit Protestants?' curiosity asks of one of the Sisters. 'Why, surely—if they are mad!' she answers sweetly. More corridors, more white beds, more warder religieuses, and at last out through locked entrances on to the roof, whence we look down on all Anne Leroy's city and a good deal of William the Norman's too. The 'little convent' lies below, buildings and flowers and trees and walls, variously dight lunatics and darkly draped religieuses, chapel roofs and the crosses of two graveyards, tiny chateaux for rich noblemen and noblewomen, flower-gardens for them, aviaries, fountains, carefully guarded fishponds, all of miniature delight that can be devised. Just at our feet is the pleasure-ground of the women lunatics, rendered fourfold by high walls. In one division the rich ladies lounge in low chairs amidst gorgeous flower-beds; in another women of a lower class take their ease a trifle less luxuriously, or pace up and down in the shade. The other twain are for the paupers. In the first of these movements cease not, feet wag on the gravel, fingers drum, heads nod unmeaningly; there is no quiet there. They are the ever-restless, separated from the more placid variety lest all should become restless. But in the last garden there is peace. Figures sit under the trees like logs, desire seems to have failed, a voice seldom breaks the quiet of the peopled lime-walk. There is sunshine round them, greenery over their heads; but they sit on dumbly, their eyes vacantly gazing, doomed to be mere existences in a world that lives. And we lift our eyes from the sadnesses of Anne Leroy's noble charity and the great enfolding walls, and outside spreads the racecourse, flecked with flags and hurdles, and beyond all the shivering heat of distance and the serrated squadrons of poplars, looking like giant ghosts of the old Northmen marching to battle.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEORGE DRIFFELL.¹

BY JAMES PAYN.

PART III.

It was fortunate for me that I had now some occupation which monopolised my mind and prevented it from dwelling on that dread interview, which, however unlikely, might take place any day. I paid many visits to the office of the 'Crescent,' partly on literary business, partly with the intention of cultivating Mr. Gledson's acquaintance. The more I saw of him the more I liked him, and in a less degree I venture to think that that was also his experience of myself; for in the first place I was really a capable contributor whom he could trust for that punctuality and carefulness which it seemed he had found to be a rarity; and secondly, I was what he called 'a reasonable being' in the taking advice with respect to alterations, of which he had hardly any other example. As to this he would say:

'The women are the worst. Their MS. is as the Ark of the Covenant, and to touch it is to invoke the thunder; if I restore the grammar that is wanting to a paragraph, they say: "Now you have spoilt everything, and destroyed what is most worth reading in my whole article!"'

'But that surely is not the case with all your lady contributors,' I said, 'the one, for instance, who wrote "The Home Spirit" in the last number of your magazine.'

'Oh, you appreciated that, did you?' he answered. 'It is very seldom that our verse is remarked upon—or indeed is worthy of remark.'

Then, to my astonishment, in a soft and gentle voice he repeated the poem:

THE HOME SPIRIT.

Like a sunbeam gliding over common places,
About this simple home of ours she moves;
Whate'er her hands are set unto she graces,
Her duties not beneath the things she loves.

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Serene, unconscious of her perfect sweetness
 As one of those moss-roses she hath tied
 In clustered beauty, with some art fast neatness,
 As born high-heartedness excelleth pride.
 In all things studious of another's pleasure,
 In all things careful for another's pain;
 Inactive never, never without leisure
 When age or childhood her sweet aid would gain.
 If e'er, thick folded, fall the veil of sorrow,
 She beareth up the burden to its tomb;
 The love balm dropping aye, until some morrow
 Patteth the tender heart again in bloom;
 And now the hush of sickness stealeth through us,
 A healing spirit 'midst its sad array,
 So strong in hope, she almost seemeth to us
 To chase that shadow, dark and vague, away.
 Ah! bliss to him to whom she shall be given!
 Fond heart, clear head, pure soul, and form so fair,
 Her spirit well might cleave to it in heaven,
 And meet him changeless and unangel'd there.

'Yes,' continued Mr. Gledson critically, 'I should not have remembered those lines had they not been above the average.'

'Are you quite sure,' I remarked slyly, 'that there was no other reason—such as a personal knowledge of the young lady, for instance?'

'Young lady? How do you know she was young?' he answered sharply. 'Well, there *was* a reason. You remember your friend Miniver's poem we published the month before, "My Wish"?'

'Oh yes, quite well.'

'Then oblige me by repeating it.'

No less astonished than before, for it was not Mr. Gledson's way to dwell on the merits of his contributors, I did so.

MY WISH.

Cherry-cheek'd, merry-eyed,
 Lip apart, head aside,
 Crown'd with thy golden hair;
 Maiden, this youth of thine,
 Far more than war or wine,
 Breedeth joy, slayeth care.

Sinketh the soul awhile
 Under thy perfect smile,
 Brimm'd with all love and grace;
 Lady, for such must be
 All that are like to thee,
 Ne'er may tear soil that face!

Ah, that my wish were charm
 'Gainst every mortal harm,
 Happy for aye wert thou;
 Nor should the hand of care
 Ever so much as dare
 Shadow that happy brow.

But if woe doth come on
 Even thee, pretty one,
 Brave is that gentle heart;
 Youth may fade, beauty fly,
 Truth and love never die,
 Nor may pure faith depart.

Safe art thou, with those three,
 Vulture-faced misery
 Maketh no common nest;
 Stoopeth, and then upsprings,
 While joy's expanded wings
 Fold at their sight and rest.

'The fact is,' said Mr. Gledson when I had finished, 'that Miniver's poem produced the young lady's.'

'Excited her ambition, I suppose?'

'Not at all, her antagonism. She disapproved of Miniver's verses because they only dwelt upon the physical charms of their subject, and wrote her own to show what really should make women worthy of a man's love. At least that is what I gathered from the very brief conversation I had with her on the matter.'

'And does Miniver know of this?' I inquired.

'Nay,' he answered, smiling, 'that you must find out for yourself. I fear I have been already somewhat indiscreet.'

There the matter dropped, but my curiosity was aroused. I could get no corroboration of the little romance from Miniver, who, however, was much too clever to reveal anything he wished to conceal; but one day, when calling at the office, whom should I see emerging from the audience chamber, where the smart people were received, but Lucy Gilderoy, immediately followed by Mr. Gledson. That she was acquainted with him I knew, for she had been with her sister at Grasmere when he and Braidwood had gone to the Lakes together, but nothing could account for her visiting him at the office of the 'Crescent' but the fact of her being a contributor. It struck me at once that it was she who had written 'The Home Spirit,' and, what was more, that Grace had been the subject of the poem. Her portrait, so far as character went, had indeed been most accurately drawn. I now remembered that there had of late been illness in the family—one of Mr. Parker's little

children having been laid up with low fever—which no doubt had suggested certain lines in the poem. When I taxed her with the authorship, not without many congratulations, she admitted it at once, and yet, as it seemed to me, with some show of discomfort. I expressed a hope that I had not annoyed her by compelling the revelation, but it was evidently not that which caused her embarrassment; nor, I was sure, was it on account of my former *tendresse* for her sister, which she well understood I had long got over. Indeed, I spoke of Grace's marriage, which was to take place the following week, and asked for her opinion upon a certain wedding present that was to be despatched that very evening. She said she thought it very suitable and that there was no duplicate, but in a voice so confused, and indeed almost tearful, that when she left me I felt quite miserable about it. Was it possible that something had occurred which had made Braidwood appear a less desirable bridegroom than he had been? This last and worst explanation of her conduct, however, was proved at once to be groundless, since the next morning I received the kindest letter from Grace herself, overflowing as it should be with happy confidence in her future. There was, however, this single note of sorrow.

'I greatly regret to say, dear Mr. Gresham, that, in consequence of the serious indisposition of my father, the invitations to our wedding will be confined, almost exclusively, to members of our respective families. There will be no one, I am sure, whose absence from it Richard and I will regret more than yours, and it gives me sincere sorrow to feel that our meeting must be postponed till we have the pleasure of welcoming you to our own house.'

I was not altogether sorry that I was thus preserved from an introduction to Mr. Gilderoy, whom I could not forgive for his cruel conduct to poor Laurence, while at the same time this accounted for Lucy's behaviour on the previous day, who, though conscious that I was not to be a guest at her sister's wedding, had probably no authority for stating the fact.

A few days afterwards, however, being at the office of the 'Crescent,' these comforting ideas of mine were a good deal dispelled by a conversation with Mr. Gledson.

'Well,' he said, when he had nodded to me good-naturedly, which was his usual sign of welcome, 'why did we not see you at the wedding the other day?'

It astonished me very much that Mr. Gledson had been there

himself. He was not very intimate with the Braidwoods—who rather ignored the existence of the magazine—and, save through the two girls, knew nothing of the Gilderoy's whatever; and since the illness of Mr. Gilderoy had, in Grace's words, 'confined the invitations almost exclusively to members of the two families,' how was it that Mr. Gledson had been included in them? However, I could of course show no surprise on this account, but only reply for my part that I had not been asked.

'Not asked?' he repeated; 'why, Richard told me that he hoped you would be his best man.'

'And who was his best man?' I inquired with some curiosity.

'Why, Miniver, whom I should rather have taken, from the way in which I have heard him spoken of, as his second best. I always understood you were the more intimate of the two.'

I certainly had been, and I confess that I felt not a little hurt at what had happened; I did my best, however, to affect indifference.

'Had there been many people,' I inquired, 'at the wedding, and what was the Gilderoy's house like?'

'The house,' Mr. Gledson said, 'was a huge one, with an excellent garden, on Lavender Hill. There had been a large gathering, but there was room for everybody. The bride had looked uncommonly well,' &c.

'And the old gentleman?' I said. 'What was *he* like, or was he too ill to be seen?'

'Ill! Not a bit of it. He was well enough—that is, in a physical sense—but, between you and me, I think getting a little dotty. He gave me the impression of one who had once had a very strong will, but whose strength had gone out of him.'

'It seems, however,' said I dryly, and thinking of how he had treated Laurence, 'that he can be obstinate enough on occasion, and even without occasion.'

'That is possible, but I am told that his son-in-law, Mr. Parker, has considerable influence over him, and that he always exercises it for good. Uncle Charles, as they call him, is the favourite of the family; he struck me as being a very pleasant clever fellow—the life and soul of the business they say, and I can well believe it. He is also a well-read man; Mrs. Parker is a very handsome woman—handsomer even than her sisters—and her children very beautiful. The one that has been ill looks like a little angel, and to see her and the bride together was very touching. She is

devoted to Aunt Grace, who I have no doubt is deserving of all her sister wrote of her in "The Home Spirit." It is a character portrait to the life.'

'I hope Braidwood will make her a good husband,' said I, with an involuntary sigh.

'I think he will. He is rather too old and grave for his years, but that makes him none the worse match for her; I should not have said the same had he fixed his affections on Miss Lucy.'

I agreed with that, and, putting Laurence in the place of Braidwood, I could not help thinking that the observation would have been equally applicable to his case. The more I saw of Lucy, the more I doubted her fitness for being his wife, and now I began to see a good deal of her, mainly at the office, but also at Mrs. Argent's, who had been abroad for some time and only just returned to her London house. She had quite sympathised with me as to Mr. Gilderoy's ill-conduct to Laurence; indeed it had made her rather a stranger to the house before her departure to the Continent, and I don't think she was sorry for the excuse to be absent from Grace's wedding on that account.

'Now your friend Braidwood and she are married,' she said, 'I hope to see a great deal of Grace; but I no longer visit at Lavender Hill with any comfort to myself. I have no patience with that old gentleman, and that's a fact.'

It almost seemed to me that she had some new reason for dissatisfaction with him.

'Lucy, of course, I shall still see at her sister's, but it will be a real sorrow to me to have so much less of Mary's company—that is, Mrs. Parker—she is such a sweet creature, but so devoted to her husband that one can scarcely ever secure her apart from him.'

'But Mr. Parker is very nice also,' said I, 'is he not?'

'Yes, a most agreeable person; a little old for her one would have thought, but they get on together admirably. Only he hates society. It is only with the greatest difficulty that he can be got to dine anywhere. Mr. Gilderoy was something of a recluse, and in this respect, and this only, his son-in-law has done him more harm than good—that is to say, in the discouragement of his friends. Now his daughter is married he will probably see but little of her, and of the elder Braidwoods nothing at all.'

From what I had seen of this couple I did not think that the loss of their acquaintance would be a very deplorable matter. Thanks to their son I had received one or two invitations to dine

with them, but had derived no pleasure from the experience. They were essentially commonplace people; the old lady good-natured enough, but very heavy in hand; the husband pompous and purse-proud. One wondered how their son came to be such a vast improvement on the old stock; but such a transformation in a generation is not uncommon, and perhaps his university course—which has usually a good effect in the way of culture in such cases—had something to do with it.

Mrs. Argent, a rich widow, lived in a large house in South Kensington, and the recently married couple took a smaller one in the same neighbourhood. Notwithstanding that I still felt a little sore at having been excluded from their list of marriage guests, I paid them an early visit on their return from their honeymoon. They gave me a most friendly welcome, and even, as I thought, a particularly kind one, as though they were conscious of shortcoming. Nothing was said about it at first, but Braidwood took the opportunity of his wife leaving us for a few minutes to explain the matter.

‘There is one thing, my dear Gresham, which I wish to relieve my mind about; it has been the one shadow upon our honeymoon, namely, your not having received an invitation to our wedding.’

I smiled and said, like Mr. Toots and quite as foolishly, that it was of no consequence; but he shook his head.

‘It cannot be but that you must have thought it very unfriendly, and indeed downright discourteous,’ he continued. ‘You were, of course, to be my best man; but when we spoke of it at Lavender Hill my father-in-law fell into almost the same way about it as he did in Driffell’s case, and indeed on his account. He said that you had seen of late a great deal of Lucy, which he thought injudicious, since it kept up a certain indirect connection between her and Driffell; that your coming to the house would naturally increase intimacy; and, in a word, that he would not encourage it. You may imagine what I felt at this, and I am sure you would have been satisfied with what I said. It is probably many years, if ever, since the old gentleman heard so many home truths as I supplied him with. I was sure of Grace and wanted none of his money, so that I could afford to give him my views upon his behaviour. It was a very unpleasant interview, and but for Parker—who I must say behaved like a trump—might have had very unpleasant consequences. Though I had to give in, I felt I could not write to you on the subject; I was too

ashamed to do it, and besides it was so difficult to explain the matter on paper. So Grace and I agreed to trust to your good-natured forbearance, and to wait to explain what must have seemed our outrageous conduct till we got home.'

Of course I begged Braidwood not to say another word about it, and as I was doing so the door opened, and his wife re-entered the room accompanied by a lady whose beauty threw even that of Grace into the shade. She was older by some few years, but still combined the charms of youth with that sympathetic gentleness of expression, born of solicitude for her little ones, which is only to be found in matrons.

'My sister, Mrs. Parker,' said Grace, though the introduction was unnecessary, for her likeness to both her and Lucy was unmistakable; they were by far the three prettiest women—though 'pretty' was a word that did scant justice to them—I ever saw in one family.

'I ought to know Mr. Gresham,' said Mrs. Parker, with gentle significance, 'and it is not my fault, nor, I may add, my husband's, that I have not done so long ago.'

The sweetness of her voice, the graciousness of her manner, are as impossible to convey in words as some ravishing note in music. I was literally enchanted, and stammered out something exquisitely silly about it being better late than never. She very properly took no notice of it.

'Richard and Grace have talked of you so often,' she continued, 'that you seem to be quite an old acquaintance, while Lucy is for ever praising the articles of her co-contributor in the "*Crescent*." Richard thinks nothing of his father's magazine, but *we* think immensely of it.'

I would rather she had spoken of my articles from personal knowledge than at second hand, but it was clear she meant nothing but kindness.

'Miss Lucy herself,' I replied, 'is a very brilliant contributor to the "*Crescent*"; Mr. Gledson calls her "our poet."'

'But is not that rather hard upon Mr. Miniver,' remarked Grace, smiling, 'who writes verses in the "*Crescent*" also?'

'My belief is,' observed Braidwood, 'that they use the thing instead of the penny post to communicate their tender thoughts to each other.'

'You are very scandalous, Richard,' said Mrs. Parker reprovingly.

‘And very disrespectful to the “Crescent,”’ added her sister.

‘Miniver’s attitude to it is not exactly reverent,’ remarked Braidwood. ‘You should hear him give imitations of old Gled.’

‘And not only of old Gled., I dare say,’ said I, with a smile that I felt to be rather faint.

‘Well, he has given us one or two of the other contributors,’ admitted Braidwood; ‘but very good-natured sketches, you know.’

Both the ladies were laughing; it was clear to me that, though Mrs. Parker had not seen me before, she had seen somebody *like* me. I knew that Miniver possessed great powers of mimicry, with which he had often amused me, but it never before struck me that its exercise was so reprehensible.

‘He does Linton capitally,’ continued Braidwood. ‘You know Linton, who writes about the aristocracy—county people and that sort of thing? Linton the Liar, as old Gled. calls him. His boastfulness about his genealogy and his family title-deeds, though he lives in second-floor lodgings, and how he “writes for the ‘Times,’” as he calls it, but is never printed—all that Miniver paints to the life.’

I knew that very well; but I should not have called it a good-natured sketch. My face, I suppose, betrayed my feelings, for Grace here observed very gravely—

‘I am sure that Mr. Gresham will understand that Mr. Miniver is much too good a friend of his to describe him ill-naturedly, and that even if it were otherwise he would not choose us for his audience.’

‘That’s quite true, my dear fellow,’ said Braidwood; ‘my wife would be at him like a wild cat if he represented you unworthily.’

These excellent people certainly took a great deal of trouble to flatter my *amour propre*, which, as is the case with most persons of my age, was easily wounded. As for not having been asked to Braidwood’s wedding, I still thought it a personal slight, but it was plain they had not been to blame for it, and if for the moment I had felt irritated with Miniver for not having resisted the temptation of making fun of me, as he made of every one else, Mrs. Braidwood’s gracious words had won my forgiveness. Indeed when Miniver called on me, as it happened, that very evening, I was unfeignedly glad to see him; I had not met him since he had been at the wedding, and was curious to learn his impressions of the Gilderoy family. To my inquiries about the old gentleman he favoured me with what was doubtless an admirable portrait,

but from not having seen the original I was, of course, unable to appreciate the likeness. From the hacking cough, the slipshod gait, the depressed tone, diversified by fits of impatience, I could gather, however, what manner of man Mr. Gilderoy was far better than from any mere verbal description.

'We met on an auspicious occasion,' said Miniver; 'we probably saw him at his best, but still we could pretty well imagine what his worst was. Even from his daughters, you know, one could gather it was pretty bad, or, at all events, had been so. Uncle Charles, as they call him—that is, Mr. Parker—gave me to understand that things had much improved of late years. In fact, with him the old fellow is not only very reasonable, but, as it seems to me, is twisted about his little finger. I was told that the only thing in which he has opposed himself to Parker was that affair of poor Driffell; about that he was adamant.'

'And I conclude will always be so,' I remarked. 'I mean that no lapse of time will cause him to regard Driffell with favour.'

I noticed that Miniver looked rather uncomfortable as he replied: 'No, I fear, that is I think not; it appears to me that matter is closed for good.'

It was not the first time I had had my suspicions of Miniver as regarded Lucy. They had met more than once at the 'Crescent' office; a good deal oftener, it was probable, at Mrs. Argent's; and might not his selection as Braidwood's best man have had something to do with his future admission to the family? There was not a word to be said against him; he was a very suitable match for Lucy every way; he was not taking her away from Driffell, for that matter, as he had truly said, was 'closed,' nor did I think that Lucy would have reopened it even if she had had the chance. Yet I felt sick at heart for poor Laurence, and the disappointment of his fondest hope. That Miniver spoke with rapture of Mrs. Parker did not at all surprise me; it did not need that he thought himself likely to become her brother-in-law that he expressed himself with such enthusiasm.

'Parker, as I have said, I like, but he is not to be spoken of in the same breath as his wife; indeed, he seems to me too old and serious for her. But I am bound to say I never saw a more loving couple. She seems to sympathise with him in everything, and only regrets that dear Charles is really too domestic, and thereby prevents the world—by not mixing with it—from appreciating his perfections.'

Then we began to talk 'shop.' We were both making our way, in a modest fashion, in the literary world, and both pretty constant contributors to the 'Crescent.' Miniver was rather too full of fun to suit its highly respectable pages; Mr. Gledson thought him rather flippant and frivolous as a writer, though personally he could not help liking him. I had an idea that Braidwood had helped him to his connection with the magazine, as indeed he had helped me.

'Old Gled. has asked me to give him some society sketches,' observed Miniver; 'they are to begin next month.'

'You will do them very well, no doubt,' I said; 'so far as the men go, at least, no one better. But I should have thought, since you are a bit of a Bohemian, that you would not so accurately describe the ladies. But perhaps you have had some recent experiences of which I know nothing.'

Miniver flushed in what I thought a very tell-tale manner. 'Well, the fact is,' he said, 'I am to have some assistance. The speeches are to be done in collaboration.'

'What, with some lady-killer?'

'No, with a lady; in fact, with Miss Lucy Gilderoy.'

I dare say it was wrong, I am sure it was vulgar, but I exclaimed: 'The deuce they are!'

Of course it is possible for folks to collaborate and yet not be in love with each other. Monsieur Chatrian, for example, if one can trust to the law reports, was certainly not in love with Monsieur Erckmann; but the case of Mr. Frederic Miniver and Miss Lucy Gilderoy was different. The piece of information that had just been communicated to me convinced me, in fact, of what I had previously only suspected. Miniver was to win the prize which Laurence had lost. I did not tax him with it (and indeed he was not to blame), and at that time he did not acknowledge that there was anything between them beyond liking, but had he confessed they were already engaged it could not have brought conviction nearer home. After all, why should it not be so? I reflected. They were kindred spirits; the one gay and bright as a bird, the other less superficial and more imaginative, but fond of innocent pleasures and not inclined to take disappointments to heart. He was a more fitting match for her than Laurence, I felt assured, and also that that would be her view of the matter; there had been a little kink in the strands of her life, but now it had been smoothed away, and there would be no further need to think

about it. But poor Laurence was not made that way, and my whole heart ached for him, while it felt an unreasonable indignation against Miniver, to whom happiness had come so easily. Perhaps a little jealousy on my own account mingled with this feeling; for now it was plain why Miniver had been selected as Braidwood's best man instead of myself; his welcome at Lavender Hill was also obviously to be set down to the same cause, though I could still hardly understand how Mr. Gilderoy had been induced to show no objection to one who, though not so intimately as myself, had been on terms of friendship with Laurence Driffell. If Miniver and Lucy should marry, there would of course be no further fear of the associations of which the old gentleman had been so apprehensive, and it was possible that even I myself should be no longer in a state of 'taboo.' It may be thought that I was wanting in self-respect in thus looking forward to being received with favour by one who had behaved so ill both to myself and my friend; but I very much prized the acquaintance of such of the Gilderoyes as I knew, and the antagonism of the head of the family obviously interfered with it; and, moreover, though I scarcely confessed it even to myself, I was inexplicably curious to see this old gentleman who seemed to play the part of a small providence (though not a good one) to so many people.

In a few days after this conversation with Miniver this opportunity seemed to be offered me. I was calling at Mrs. Argent's, and to my great pleasure found Mrs. Parker with her. She had brought one of her children with her, a beautiful but rather delicate-looking little girl; they were presently, she said, going to be called for by her husband.

'It will, I am sure,' she observed, 'be a great pleasure to him to make your acquaintance, Mr. Gresham. He has no sympathy with papa's prejudices against you, and has done his best, though, unfortunately, without success, to remove them.'

'I am greatly obliged both to him and to you,' I answered, smiling, 'but I should be sorry to be the cause of your husband getting into any trouble or unpleasantness on my account. Perhaps it will be better for me to remove the object of so much apprehension,' and I rose to depart.

'Indeed, Mr. Gresham,' she replied gravely, 'I do hope you will not go away for any such reason. Though my husband is willing to do much for peace and quietness, he is the last person to place himself in a false position for the sake of conciliating

anybody. He would not sacrifice his independence of character for the sake of any man, however nearly he may be related to him, and indeed I know that he is desirous of an opportunity to assure you of his personal disapproval of the way in which you have been treated. The chance may not occur again, since I can so seldom get him to leave business and give me the pleasure of his company even for an afternoon. If it were only to oblige me, Mr. Gresham, I entreat you to stay.'

'My dear Mrs. Parker,' said I, 'of course I will stay.' Then the conversation turned upon Lucy and her literary work. 'So I hear your sister is going to shoot folly as it flies, to describe the world of society in the "Crescent,"' I observed.

'I believe she has something of that kind in view,' replied Mrs. Parker. Her voice had its usual gentleness, but I thought there was a false note in it, a certain affected ignorance or indifference, which I rather resented. I was debarred from intercourse with the Gilderoy family, but Miniver was my friend, and she need not have taken it for granted that he had not informed me of the matter.

'And the sketches,' I remarked, 'are to be made in collaboration, I understand.'

'You will say I am not very literary, but as to "collaboration,"' observed Mrs. Argent, 'I don't quite know what that means.'

'Well, when a young gentleman and a young lady collaborate,' said I——

There was a ring at the front door, and the child jumped up, crying: 'That is papa.'

The delicate subject, if it was so, was forgotten. A flush of pleasure overspread Mrs. Parker's gentle face. She looked like one who has some present to show one which we are sure to admire.

'Edith, run down and bring your papa up, and tell him Mr. Gresham is here. He will be *so* pleased.'

The child obeyed with a shriek of delight, and after the manner of her age omitted to close the door behind her. From the echoing hall we heard the sound of the visitor's footsteps on the tiled floor; the welcoming voice of the girl as she hurried downstairs into her father's arms; then a few words, which, of course, we could not catch; and then the opening and shutting of the hall door.

'I hope nobody has called just at this moment,' observed Mrs. Parker anxiously; 'it will be so awkward.'

Then the child returned, with a very different step from that with which she had left us. The tears were gathering in her eyes, her voice was laden with them as she said: 'Oh, mamma, I have had such a disappointment.'

'But where's your papa?' exclaimed her mother.

'He is not coming; he has gone. Is it not sad?'

'Sad! it is unaccountable. What can it mean? What did he say?'

'Well, he bade me tell you he was very sorry, but some urgent work had just come in at the office and demanded his immediate attention; he ought not to have come at all, he said, only he could not bear the idea of sending any one else to put you off. And you were to take me to the Zoological Gardens just the same,' added the child, not so rapidly as the rest of her story, but with even more impressiveness.

'It is the first time this month,' said poor Mrs. Parker, in a most distressful tone, 'that Charles has been at liberty to give me an afternoon.'

'Then let us hope it is very important business indeed,' said Mrs. Argent, dryly, 'that has prevented it.'

'There is no doubt of that,' replied Mrs. Parker, the injured wife lost at once in the tender apologist; 'it will have distressed him almost as much as me. I have not much heart for sightseeing now, but since he wishes me not to disappoint you, my darling, let us go.'

Mr. Parker, so far as we knew, had expressed no such apprehension, but this paternal sentiment was, I am sure, attributed to him in the most perfect good faith. I never saw a wife more fond or more oblivious to a husband's failing. Mrs. Argent made no objection to her departure, but signed to me to remain behind.

'I am afraid my dear Mary has got a coward for her husband,' were her first words when we were left alone.

'Why so?' I inquired, for I was quite unaware of her meaning.

'Well, that story of his about business at the office was all rubbish. I heard his hansom stop and then go away without him; he had dismissed it and had no intention of giving up his plan of taking his wife and children to the Zoo, till Edith told him you were here. Then, out of fear of his father-in-law's displeasure, he did not dare to come up, but went away again. It was a cowardly thing to do, to disappoint that devoted wife of his for such a reason.'

'But I thought,' said I, 'you had all such a high opinion of Mr. Parker.'

'I used to think well of him myself, but of late I have had my doubts about him. You and I, Mr. Gresham, have always been good friends. You made me your confidant about Grace, you know, and a woman likes that; and I have always taken your part as regards your exclusion from the Gilderoy circle. I thought it very unjust that Mr. Miniver was admitted to it so easily while you were left out in the cold, and I said so. This has caused a little friction between me and Mr. Parker, who defended his father-in-law's conduct, and that is why I was not informed of what I have no doubt is an engagement between Mr. Miniver and Lucy; it is not pretty to treat an old friend of the family like me in that way.'

I was sorry to see Mrs. Argent take the matter so much to heart, especially as it was partly for my sake.

'I have no certain knowledge,' I said, 'of any engagement, but the collaboration looks a little suspicious.'

'Well, of course,' returned the widow, 'and, moreover, I read the fact in Mary's face; it was not her fault, of course, but her husband's, that I have been kept in the dark about it, and she looked thoroughly ashamed of having had orders to hold her tongue.'

'Then Mr. Parker, you think,' I remarked, 'can be authoritative like his father-in-law?'

'I am really almost afraid to say what I think,' said the widow, who, it was clear to me, thought she had said rather too much. 'It is only certain that both you and I have cause of complaint against somebody.'

I laughed, and we parted in high good humour, but the occurrences of the afternoon had depressed me strangely. When we are young and healthy, and well-to-do, small troubles have power to distress us; we do not recognise how small they are till, as the children say, we get something really to cry about. A letter I received by that afternoon's post from Luxton swept all remembrance of trivial annoyances out of my mind. It was from my old friend the rector, and marked 'private and confidential.'

'Pray come to the Rectory to-morrow (Saturday); we have had some news of the person in whom we are so much interested, and your presence and assistance will be of the greatest importance. Not a word of this, of course, to any one; you are merely coming

to spend a couple of nights at your old tutor's, as indeed you ought to have done long ago.'

That was quite true; I had not had the heart—which is the euphemism of selfish youth for not fulfilling a painful duty—to go to Luxton, and witness Laurence's melancholy and his mother's still more painful resignation. I had made new friends, had my own occupations, and, though I was certainly not indifferent to the lady of Driffell Hall and her son, had become independent of them. When people lose their spirits they must be very sanguine if they still expect to retain the society of the young.

Whatever had been amiss with my previous conduct, I had not, however, a moment's hesitation in obeying Mr. Chorley's summons. I telegraphed at once to announce my arrival, and the rector met me at the station. I thought he looked older and graver than I had ever seen him. He was a good, easy-going clergyman of the old style, disinclined for all business matters unconnected with his calling, and I could easily imagine that the having to take a part, however small, in a matter such as he had now in hand was very disagreeable to him. That Fate had vouchsafed to him alone the opportunity of meeting the missing man was not a favour that he was thankful for. He had, of course, revealed that incident to Mr. Sandeman, though with greater hesitation and doubt of it having actually occurred than when he spoke of it to me. As the train took him farther and farther from London, he told me, the incident seemed more and more unreal to him. And he had every wish to disbelieve in its occurrence. For if he saw the missing man, it was certain that his old friend and neighbour was behaving—whatever might be his reason for it—in a most disgraceful and unfeeling manner. It is not too much to say that he would have preferred to have had certain news of Mr. Driffell's death. When he told his story to the lawyer, Mr. Sandeman had put aside at once all notion of his senses having been misled in the matter. He was not a man who suffered from imagination himself, and he could not understand how, provided one was not near-sighted, one's eyesight could deceive one. He too, perhaps, would have preferred to have heard of his former client's demise—if he could have got good evidence of it—but the fact of Mr. Driffell's being alive and in London was not unwelcome to him, since it offered at least a chance of opening some sort of communication with him, which by this time had grown to be of great importance, for the time had arrived for the execution of that deed between

father and son which was so essential to the latter's interests. At present the lawyer and the rector were the only persons who were in possession of the fact (for such it was concluded to be) of Mr. Driffell's existence; and it had been decided between them that an appeal should be made to him on his son's behalf. Accordingly, the following cautiously worded advertisement had been inserted in the 'Agony Column' of the 'Times':

'A has been seen and recognised; no attempt will be made to discover his secret, but he is earnestly entreated for a's sake (who is unacquainted with it) to afford S., in conjunction with one other person, the opportunity of seeing him with the view of transacting most important business, after which (if he so pleases) all connection with him will finally close.

This advertisement, on which he immensely prided himself (and to which, by the way, he presently drew my attention as a literary man and a judge of composition), owed its being to Mr. Sandeman's unaided genius. The rector would have had some appeal made to the feelings of the missing man, and a 'door for repentance,' as he expressed it, however tardily, opened to him; but the lawyer had justly pointed out that the time had gone by for such overtures; the man had been too long living his new life, whatever it might be, to be recalled to his old one, and if he had repented of the step he had taken it had always been within his power to retrace it. The rector, in his simplicity, would have headed the advertisement, 'To G.D.,' which, as the lawyer pointed out, would have been recognised at once by any reader cognisant of the circumstances, whereas the great A and the little a (for his son) would awaken no suspicion, while the true initial S. (for Sandeman) would make the matter plain to the person they were addressing, if his eye (and whose more likely to give its attention to an 'Agony Column'?) should fall on it at all.

'It was all very clever and logical,' observed Mr. Chorley dryly, while narrating these facts to me after dinner; 'but what rather took the guilt off Sandeman's gingerbread was this little note I got the next day from an old acquaintance of yours:

' "Dear Sir,—I recognised, of course, your communication to Mr. D. in to-day's 'Times.' It was not very prudently worded. Still, it is not everybody who, like myself, finds a particular interest in the 'Agony Column.' I gather from it that the opinion I always expressed to you about that gentleman's disappearance is

confirmed. I am, as before, entirely at your service in case you think I may be useful in what I may call the second chapter of this strange story.

"Yours truly,

"ROBERT DERING."

'In spite of the blow this gave to Sandeman's *amour propre*,' continued the rector, 'I think he would have employed Dering (on account of the marvellous sagacity he had exhibited in deciphering that advertisement) if he had not received the next day a communication from Mr. Driffell himself (as we conclude it to be), when, knowing your affectionate interest in Laurence's affairs, he caused me to summon *you* hither.'

This communication, of which the rector produced a copy, was written in a clerkly hand, not the least like that of Mr. Driffell, and was certainly terse and cold enough.

'A has seen the advertisement inserted (as he concludes) by S. in the "Times." He is willing to execute the deed to which it alludes upon the following conditions: S. and one other person as a witness, and no more, to be present at the interview; A's name and address to be communicated only to these persons, to C. and to a, and to no others; a deed of forfeiture of ten thousand pounds in case the condition is not kept, or any other further communication with A is attempted, to be signed by a, and deposited in A's keeping. Advertise if these terms are accepted in the same column as before.'

'This proviso of the deed of forfeiture,' said the rector, 'is, according to Sandeman's view, a mere *brutum fulmen*, but the mention of it he thought a proof of *bona fides*; it would not have been put forward had not the offer of our unhappy friend been a genuine one.'

'And little a,' I said; 'poor Laurence, does he know of all this?'

'It was absolutely necessary that he should know it,' said the rector, 'since without him the deed could not be executed, and to me fell the painful task of revealing it to him. It is sad enough, my dear Gresham, to have to speak to a father (as it has occasionally been my lot as a clergyman to do) of his son's misconduct, but how much worse to speak to a son of that of his father!'

'It must indeed have been a dreadful business,' I murmured. 'How did Laurence take it?'

'In one sense admirably—that is, there was no outburst of

indignation, no denunciation of his father's cruelty. One might have thought he had no feeling on his own account about the matter at all; but he dropped a few words upon "the selfishness and brutality" with which his mother had been treated which showed the bitterness of his soul. The fact is, I think, that with the loss of respect for his father all his former attachment to him has departed, but the knowledge that his mother still entertains her affection for the man who has proved himself so undeserving of it is wormwood to him. When I spoke to him of the absolute necessity of keeping this matter secret from her, he exclaimed with vehemence: "Secret? Of course it must be secret. To tell her would be to kill her, to shatter an already half-broken heart. My belief is that she is almost convinced that he is alive, yet holds on the skirts of hope. Her dear George, she says to herself, could never, never treat her with such cruel scorn." When I urged, weakly enough it must be confessed, that as we had no facts before us, we were not in a position, when speaking of his father's conduct, to condemn it unreservedly, he replied that in addition to his heartless desertion of his wife he did not care what Mr. Driffell had done; no subsequent crime could be greater than that first one. His calling his father "Mr. Driffell" was, I thought, terribly significant. He seemed resolved to ignore the relationship altogether. He consented, indeed, to the arrangement proposed by Mr. Sandeman, but just as he would have done if it had been connected with a stranger, with this difference—he stipulated that when completed it should not again be alluded to. *That*, he said, since provisos were being made, was his proviso.'

'Then I am not to speak to Laurence about the matter?' said I anxiously.

'Not a word; indeed he does not even know that you are cognisant of it; he expressed great pleasure at hearing you were to be with me for a day or two, but you may be certain that he will make no confidant of you.'

The relief that those words gave me it is impossible for me to express. From the moment I had been informed of what had occurred, I had had a dreadful conviction that I had been summoned to Luxton to break the matter to Laurence; now I did not know why I was wanted, but, for whatever reason, I felt that it could not involve anything so painful and unwelcome as that. At the same time I was by no means easy about it, and when the rector observed: 'That is all, my dear Frank, I need say of the

matter to-night, and will leave Sandeman to tell the rest of the story,' I was not sorry for the respite.

Though I was but a stone's-throw from the Hall, I felt disinclined to visit it that evening. The news I had heard had upset me, and so pressed upon my thoughts that I feared lest Laurence should read them in my face.

Mr. Sandeman looked in the next morning after breakfast; Mr. Chorley had asked him to dine with us the previous night, but he thought that his being invited apart from his wife might arouse that astute lady's suspicions. His countenance presented a very different appearance from that of the rector's; its cheerfulness was by no means depressed by the moral delinquency of his former client; he was now acting for his son, and had brought about—or was on the verge of doing so—an arrangement of great advantage to him, which had seemed utterly beyond hope and could only have been effected by an exceptional intelligence.

'Well, you see, my young friend,' he said, shaking hands with me very cordially, 'we were obliged to send for you back to Luxton after all; we couldn't get on without you.'

At this I smiled, though it was not a comfortable smile, for I saw that his speech was not one of mere compliment.

'The rector has told you, no doubt, of the success of our negotiations—he has shown you my advertisement, and the success it has met with. We have replied to Mr.—well, we can't be too cautious, even among friends, let us say our missing friend—by the same channel, and he has appointed an address for the desired meeting. I am going up for the purpose on Monday morning, and you are going with me.'

I said I should be very glad to have the pleasure of his company, but I did not feel so very pleased. It was evident that I was not wanted as a mere travelling companion. The rector perceived my discomfort, and here put in his word. The dear old man doubtless thought that the proposed appeal would have more force with me from his lips than from those of another.

'The fact is, my dear Frank, we have to ask you a favour that we are very sure, for all our sakes, that you will not refuse. We want you to be the witness of which Mr. Driffell writes, and whose presence is necessary for the signature of the deed.'

'The witness!' cried I, aghast. 'Do you mean to say I am to see Mr. Driffell?'

'Well, of course,' exclaimed the lawyer cheerfully. 'Who

so fitting? Indeed you are the only person possible, at least on our side, since the knowledge of the affair is to be limited to four of us, and you are already one of them. Our missing friend won't bite you.'

Never was jesting, I thought, more ill timed or, as the Apostle terms it, 'inconvenient.' If I had had the courage to be coward enough, I would have refused. I did not say 'no' to a proposal which I felt to be so necessary to the interests of my friend; but the idea of meeting Mr. Driffell was hateful to me. Even that of doing so in the street by chance had haunted me ever since Mr. Chorley had had that painful experience; but to do so designedly, to see the man who had once been so kind to me, but for whom I now felt nothing but contempt, was abhorrent to me to the last degree.

'It will not be a long business,' said the lawyer comfortingly; 'the interview will be at least as disagreeable to him as to you. I doubt whether he will even open his lips. You will not be doing anything inimical to his interests, remember; on the contrary, you will be helping him to make some atonement, which he will doubtless be glad to make, for the wrong that he has done to his own flesh and blood.'

This argument was a sensible one, and had its weight with me, though, as I have said, in any case I should not have resisted the appeal.

'It will be very unpleasant,' I said—not, it must be confessed, very graciously—'but of course I am in your hands. I will do what you wish.'

'I knew you would, Frank, unless you were greatly changed,' exclaimed the rector a little triumphantly.

'Who ever doubted it?' observed the lawyer, clapping me on the back.

My impression is that *he* had doubted it, and that Mr. Chorley had been confident to the contrary; but, at all events, the matter was settled. I had to look forward as cheerfully as I could to my 'black Monday.'

It was in the 'bleak November,' the saddest and gloomiest month of the year, that I took my way that afternoon over the dead leaves and the rotting soil along the path to the Hall. How often had I trodden it with the gaiety and elasticity of youth, and with the certainty of a jovial welcome from my old playfellow, and how far away that time seemed now! Yet, as I drew near the

once hospitable door, it seemed strange that Mr. Driffell was not there, as he was wont to be at that hour, having returned home to lunch, and starting again for the mill, with his cigar stuck in the extreme corner of his mouth, and eager to be at work again. No one was now visible, and I noticed that the drive in front of the house had no impress of wheel or hoof. I had heard that no company, save a few intimate friends, were now received, and, as it seemed, there were even no callers. It was a comfort to me to see Merton's familiar face, as he opened the door to me, for (though I don't know why, except that everything had the air of change) I had almost expected a stranger's. Whether he was really pleased to see me, or the gloom of the house had put him into chronic high spirits, he greeted me with a welcoming smile.

'This is a sight, Mr. Frank, good for sore eyes,' he was so good as to say; then, as if repenting of so much cordiality, he added: 'But you ain't so bright-looking as you were, and ever so much older. Dearie me, what a change a few years do make!'

'I am afraid it has been made in other people too, Merton,' said I smiling, for indeed the butler, whom I had always known mature, like his master's wines, had got to look quite the old man.

'Well, yes, sir; neither the missis nor Master Laurence are what they used to be,' he replied, ignoring the personal allusion; 'things are very quiet here—not a bottle of champagne been drawn for a twelvemonth. However, please the pigs, there will be some "pop" to-night.'

As he evidently suggested that the wine would make its appearance in my honour, I forgave him the extreme familiarity of the remark.

'Is Mr. Laurence at home?' I asked.

'Oh no, sir; he is at the mill, as usual; never comes back in the arternoon to take his snack, as his father did. It's grind, grind, grind, with him all day.'

However wholesome this devotion to business might be for him, as preventing his mind from dwelling on less agreeable themes, it struck me that it must make his mother's life a very lonely one.

'Mrs. Driffell is within, I conclude?' for the butler had already taken charge of my hat and umbrella.

'Yes, sir, in the old master's room; there she sits mostly all

her time now. The drawing-room is seldom used, and for that matter the dining-room might be shut up too, so far as dinners are concerned.' The contempt with which Mr. Merton hinted at the very moderate character of the meals which were now provided in the establishment was equal to a folio of condemnation.

I was ushered into the room on the left hand of the entrance hall, where Mr. Driffell had been accustomed to transact such business as could not well be seen to in the billiard-room. It was very sparsely furnished with such things as had sufficed for the master's scanty needs, including even some boxes of cigars in a cupboard with a glass door; nothing was added or had been improved upon; even the volumes in the bookcases were mostly old ledgers. An apartment unlike one's notion of a lady's boudoir indeed. Yet here, as the butler had said, his mistress sat every day, and almost all day, in preference to any other room, because, of course, it had been her husband's; it was the nearest approach to him she could get. If he was dead in the flesh, but still at home in the spirit, it was probable that he would be there, where he had engaged himself in the work that had so interested him, but which he had left so suddenly and mysteriously unfinished.

The behaviour of those who have loved and lost is in this respect singularly opposite. Some avoid every spot where they have been together; the remembrance of every object is embittered by association; they endeavour to make a home for themselves somewhere where the feet of the loved one have never trodden. Others, again, haunt the places with which he has been familiar, and every object seems sanctified on which his eye has been wont to dwell. Mrs. Driffell belonged to the latter class, but with a difference. I fancy that there was some sense of atonement in what she did; she had never been able, though she had done her best, to sympathise with her husband's pursuits, or even understand their nature. He had not expected it, perhaps not even desired it; but she had, nevertheless, lamented the fact, and was remorseful about it, though, Heaven knows, she had not been to blame. It was in some sort by way of penance, I think, that she sat in his old business room surrounded by those account books.

'Ah, Frank, how nice it is to see you here again!' she exclaimed, holding out both her thin white hands. 'But it is a selfish pleasure; you will find us very dull, I fear. The Hall is not what it used to be.' Her lip trembled, the tears rose to her eyes.

'I wish for your sake, dear Mrs. Driffell,' I replied, 'that it was in my power to enliven it, but for me the Hall will always be like home. I have never received in it anything but kindness; it is associated in my memory with my happiest days.'

'It is good of you to say so,' she said, smiling, 'and good of you to come back to it, knowing how it has changed. We hear of all your successes, and sympathise with them most heartily.' She touched a copy of the 'Crescent' that lay on the table. 'Dr. Garden always prophesied that you would make a name for yourself. To know that you have done so is one of our few pleasures.'

What a selfish brute I felt! How very little I had of late concerned myself about this faithful friend! Still, thank Heaven, I was now about to do what little I could for her, or rather for her son, which, indeed, was the same thing. I expressed the gratitude I felt for her kind thoughts as well as I could, which was but poorly, for I was deeply moved. Then I asked after Laurence.

'He is well,' she replied, 'and takes a great interest in his affairs; that is his safety-valve, poor fellow. He has not got over his miserable disappointment.'

'It was a sad business,' I replied; 'but neither he nor Lucy was to blame.'

'That is what he tells me,' she said, I thought a little dryly. 'He has not a word to say against her. I hope the consequences which have been so disastrous to him have not so cruelly affected her.'

This was not put as a direct question, but I felt that it demanded a reply. It embarrassed me excessively, for my mind had been so monopolised by the rector's news and the thought of the ordeal that lay before me on Monday, that I had for the moment forgotten what it was my duty to break to Laurence concerning a matter that had even now, perhaps, an interest greater, or at all events nearer his heart, than that on account of which I had been summoned to Luxton. My hesitation, and probably some look of trouble and distress in my face, did not escape my companion.

'Has this girl already found another lover?' she inquired in a tone so curt, nay contemptuous, that, coming from so gentle a creature, I could hardly believe my ears.

'I believe that there is a likelihood of her being engaged to be married,' I answered, 'though I have not been positively informed of it.'

'I am not surprised,' said Mrs. Driffell coldly; then added, with an intense tenderness, 'Poor Laurence!'

'Let us hope, in course of time,' I said, 'that he will get over his trouble; some good girl will doubtless be found to make him happy yet.'

'That has been my hope until lately,' she rejoined, 'but I fear that his disappointment has sunk too deep.'

It was very inconsistent, I thought, that Mrs. Driffell should have shown such indignation against Lucy for forming another attachment, when it was the very thing she was hoping that Laurence would do; but to argue about such a matter, though I should have liked to put in a word for Lucy, would have been fruitless. With Laurence I knew it would be different; the news might be bitter to him, but he would attribute no blame to his old love.

'Do you think it best that I should tell your son?' I inquired gently. I most devoutly hoped she would have said 'No,' feeling very little confidence in my own diplomacy.

She hesitated a moment, then answered: 'If you will be so good; it is a painful task to impose upon you, but if I broke it to him I might say things which would distress him and yet would do no good. Being a man you will have sympathy for the girl, whereas I, you see, am his mother.'

I understood her, of course, at once; she could not trust herself to speak of 'the girl' to the son who, she was well aware, was her lover still.

Presently Laurence came home, and welcomed me with all his old friendship. His manner, which had never been gay, was graver than it used to be; we say of some men that they look 'well and hearty;' he looked well enough, but *not* hearty—the heart, as it seemed to me, had gone out of him. In tone, as in form—for the becoming leanness of youth had left him and he had 'put on flesh'—he was ten years older. I dined alone with him and his mother, the rector having an engagement (or, as I suspect, having invented one) for that evening; and afterwards Laurence and I adjourned, as usual, to the billiard-room. However, we did not play, but sat over the fire with our cigars. We had talked of the past, though it had not been easy to do so, so far as the old life at the Hall was concerned, since the central figure of it had to be left out; and also of our life at college, with no reference, however, to that fateful May term and our lady

visitors. And we had talked still more about Laurence's business affairs; it was the topic that he took most interest in, and the more eloquent he was upon it the better I was pleased, for it was a safe subject: in all others I felt there was danger. Still, this reticence about matters which, I was well convinced, were uppermost in his mind was very uncomfortable; it was not, it must be confessed, a pleasant evening, and I was congratulating myself that it was drawing to a conclusion without the occurrence of any unhappy allusion, when suddenly Laurence put this amazing question to me:

'When is Lucy going to be married, Gresham?'

'To be married! Who told you she was going to be married?'

'*You did,*' he answered with a sad smile, 'or at least your silence did so; your avoiding all mention of her could only be explained one way. You knew, of course, I should be glad to have any news of her but that.'

'And why not that?' I answered, not without some resentment. It seemed to me that Laurence was acting the dog in the manger; since he could not marry the poor girl, why should he be angry that some one else was about to take his place? I had not been angry with Braidwood because he had married Grace; to be sure, there was some difference in the circumstances, but I was never of a jealous temper. The fact was that I scarcely understood Laurence's character, how changed and even warped it had been by that great disappointment of his life. Even now it seems to me that when a young fellow has failed to secure his first love, his best and most natural course is to look out for a second; at all events not to fret and fume at Fate, and to become isolated and morose because things have not turned out at first exactly as he would have had them. There are as good fish in the sea—but these are the views of a philosopher who has long been content to see others wooing and winning, or losing, without the least inclination to join in so exciting a game. I have avoided speculative investment of all kinds on principle, and am really no judge of the conduct of one so utterly different in character from myself as Laurence Driffell.

'You are right,' he said gently, after a little pause, 'I have no cause to be angry. It will be my happiness, and I shall have no other'—he said this with a pathos of which I had not thought him capable, and which filled me with remorse and pity—'to know that all is well with her.'

I took his hand, and pressed it. 'That is right,' I said, 'and like yourself.'

'No,' he said gravely, 'I shall never be like myself again.'

Laurence was incapable of a joke at the best of times, and the present occasion could hardly come under that category, but his reply certainly sounded very strange. A ghost of a smile perhaps hovered on my lips, for he went on :

'You may well think, Frank, that the less I am like my old self the better. There was great room for improvement, no doubt, but some also for deterioration ; and that is the way I have gone.'

I murmured something of incredulity and remonstrance, and laid my hand upon his shoulder. We were, for the moment, boys again, when there were no rivals—whether male or female—in our regard for one another. There had been silence between us for some time, when suddenly Laurence exclaimed, with an effort I thought, but quite cheerfully :

'And who is to be the happy man, Frank ?'

When I said 'Miniver,' he drove his heel into the burning logs in front of which we sat, and uttered the only execration I ever heard pass his lips.

'And why not Miniver,' I said gently, 'as well as another ?'

'Quite true, I was wrong,' he replied, like a child who owns his fault ; 'just for the moment it was hard to bear, Frank, but, as you say, "Why not Miniver?" He is a good fellow ; he will make her a good husband ; but he will never love her as I loved her—never, never, *never*.'

It was very touching to see this passion of tenderness in one naturally so unemotional. It seemed to wring his very heart-strings. However, there was no more of it, and before we said good night, which was also good-bye, he had completely regained his composure.

In reply to Mr. Sandeman's second advertisement he had received a notification, in the same handwriting as before, that Monday would be a convenient day for the proposed meeting. The hour was four in the afternoon, and the place certain Chambers in the Temple, where he was to ask for a Mr. Robson, the name (as we supposed) under which Mr. Driffell now passed.

The lawyer and I took the morning express to London, and, after an early dinner at the Club, drove together to the Temple. It was certainly the most unpleasant business I had ever been engaged in. The relations which had formerly existed between Mr.

Driffell and myself made it very hard for me. I felt that, considering my youth, he might deem my interference in his affairs an impertinence. But it was not my fault; I had had this responsibility thrust upon me, and there was no alternative (except a refusal too discreditable to be thought of) but to go through with it. Mr. Sandeman did not like his mission much better than I did, though I have no doubt he was to be well paid for it. We stepped out of the cab at the Temple gates as though it had been a mourning coach, and we had come to bury a Benchman. I had never seen the perky little lawyer look so lugubrious. The address we had been directed to was in Essex Court; a long list of names was painted on the doorpost, and over one of them was pasted 'Mr. Robson,' written on a piece of paper, in a handwriting which Mr. Sandeman at once recognised as the same with that of the communications he had received. If we could have read the name beneath it, it might have helped us to track our missing man, but this was not to be thought of; he had consented to see us only upon the understanding that no attempt of any kind should be made to discover his secret. Mr. Robson's chambers were on the first floor. In answer to our summons at a miniature knocker, a clerk, or a person who looked like one, ushered us into a large room, with a table covered with briefs, all of which, I noticed, were laid upon their backs, so that the names to which they were addressed could not be read.

'In one minute, gentlemen, Mr. Robson will see you,' he said, nor did he ask us even to sit down. At this I was far from being displeased, since it seemed to augur that our interview was to be made as short as possible. Indeed, in less than the time he had mentioned, he had entered an adjoining room and returned, bidding us follow him. Snow lay thick on the ground, the court was silent, and through the muffled roar of Fleet Street I could hear my heart beat.

In a small well-furnished room, with his back to the window but full in view, sat Mr. Driffell. He looked older than his years of absence could account for, and there was a streak or two of grey in his brown hair; but his face, though grave, was far from sad, and it was with a smile of welcome that he pointed to a couple of chairs, placed opposite the fire, and within easy reach of him.

'You have brought the papers, Mr. Sandeman,' he observed, 'and Mr. Gresham, I conclude, is to be our witness?'

The two 'Misters,' which he had never used before in addressing

either of us, seemed to signify that what lay before us was a matter of business only, and to preclude any possible reference to our previous relations.

'I have them here,' said the lawyer, producing them. 'Your son has already signed them, I need not say with what——'

'You need say nothing,' interrupted Mr. Driffell austere. There was something in the dryness and resolution of the tone that roused within me the remembrance of his interview with his workmen concerning the strike; 'the point is that they are signed.'

I confess I was not sorry for the rebuke that was thus implied. I thought it foolish and useless that Mr. Sandeman should have made the least attempt, as was clear had been the case, to impart any sentiment into such a matter. All curiosity about his client had for the time departed from me; if the rest of the interview could have been conducted in dumb show, I should have been better pleased. It was almost so conducted; the rustle of parchments, the occasional scratch of a pen, for there were several deeds to be signed, were all that broke the uncomfortable silence, and seemed to intensify it. A line of Shelley that Mr. Driffell had once quoted to me about the busy woodpecker making 'stiller by its sound the inviolable quietness' occurred to me. The idea of *this* man quoting Shelley, and taking an interest in a boy's budding literary taste, seemed preposterous. So cold and unmoved he looked that he might have been a graven image. When it came to my turn to sign, my fingers trembled so that they could hardly do their office. Mr. Driffell perceived my emotion, and, when I had finished my task, to my amazement and distress, held out his hand. I took it of course, and returned its pressure, but I felt that to speak, without tears, would have been impossible; there was, however, no need to speak. Mr. Driffell did not take my companion's hand, but nodded to him, and said in quiet and almost indifferent tones, 'Good-bye.' I took up my hat at once, and already had my hand on the door, when I heard Mr. Driffell speaking in answer to something from Mr. Sandeman I did not catch.

'Mr. Chorley is in error; you may tell him from me that I was never so happy as I am now.'

It struck me then, and I think so still, that his voice was that of a man who feels what he says; there was neither boast nor hesitation about it, but the confident assertion of a fact. Mr.

Sandeman was returning at once to Luxton, and I accompanied him so far in his cab.

‘What do you think of it all?’ I said.

‘I don’t know what to think,’ he answered; ‘the whole affair seems like a nightmare. You heard what he said about his being never so happy.’

‘I did indeed; if Mrs. Driffell had heard it, it would have broken her heart.’

‘I do not believe—to do him justice—that he thinks so. They were not altogether suited to each other, and he gives her credit for exercising the same philosophy in the matter as himself.’

I thought this the most sensible remark I had ever heard the lawyer make. It seemed impossible that Mr. Driffell, being the man he had been in my eyes, could have behaved with such callousness and cruelty had he been aware what misery he was inflicting. As to Laurence, his father had not, perhaps, estimated his filial affection very highly, and foresaw that such bond as there was between them, unequal to any strain of suspicion, would soon be snapped—which, indeed, had actually happened.

Still, the mystery of Mr. Driffell’s disappearance was as inexplicable as ever. On my way home on foot, after taking leave of Mr. Sandeman, an incident occurred which, coming after the events of that afternoon, struck me as remarkable. During all the time I had been in London I had never chanced to come across Mr. Dering, and this day, of all days, I had met him face to face in Piccadilly.

‘Well,’ he said, after a friendly greeting, ‘have your friends at Luxton run their fox to earth yet?’

I felt so self-conscious in the presence of my astute companion that, forgetting he knew nothing about my visit to Mr. Chorley, I half feared he would read my late experience in my tell-tale face. ‘I do not think so,’ I replied, it must be confessed rather feebly, since it was hardly a matter about which I could be in doubt.

He smiled his usual benignant smile with a touch of contempt in it. ‘Mr. Sandeman’s pack will never succeed without the help of the fox terrier,’ he went on. ‘Even with that help there is only one thing that can ever draw the fox out of his hole.’

‘And what is that?’

‘The long arm of the law.’

'But that presupposes that the person you speak of has done something criminal,' I answered; 'which, from what we know of him, is out of the question.'

'Luxton is an Eden,' said Mr. Dering; 'the people there are as innocent as our first parents before they upset the apple cart; but to find one who has been in London so long as you have been so guileless is refreshing indeed.'

'Is it possible, Mr. Dering, that you can think a man like Mr. Driffell has brought himself within reach of the criminal law?'

'I think nothing of the kind, Mr. Gresham, I am perfectly sure of it,' was the uncompromising reply.

Strange to say, now that I had seen Mr. Driffell in the flesh, though his whereabouts and position were as mysterious as ever, I was less troubled by his presence in London than I had been when I had only had Mr. Chorley's evidence of the fact; just as Robinson Crusoe was more alarmed by the footprint in the sand than by the appearance of the savages for which it had prepared him. I had now also a good deal of literary occupation, which prevented my dwelling so much on other matters. There were several periodicals besides the 'Crescent' very ready to accept my contributions, though I still maintained a constant connection with it. This kept me in touch with Miniver and also with Lucy; indeed, association with one included the other. There was now not only no doubt of their engagement; an early date had been fixed upon for their marriage. To neither of them did I say one word of my late visit to Luxton; any allusion to Laurence would, I felt, be a source of embarrassment to both of them. Miniver had succeeded where he had failed; Lucy, forbidden to wed him, had found a lover more to her mind; but neither of them had wronged him in any way. Why, then, should I embitter their happiness by the introduction of so painful a subject? Yet now and then their high spirits and manifest delight in each other's society could not but jar somewhat on my mind when I remembered Laurence's joyless face and the sadness that hung, like a cloud, over Driffell Hall.

The only shadow upon Miniver's future, who had a greater regard for me than I deserved, was the reflection that I could not be present at his marriage; he was not so sparing of his denunciations of his father-in-law, that was to be, as Braidwood had been, but gave rather a different account of him.

'In my opinion,' he said, 'I think the old gentleman is getting imbecile. I did not hesitate to tackle him concerning his refusal to see you and all that rubbish about raking up painful associations. I said if there was anything painful—though I didn't see it—it was Lucy who would be affected by it, and that she was most anxious that you should be invited. He looked at me with lacklustre eyes, and shook his head, not, as it seemed to me, so much in negation as in nervous embarrassment, and muttered something about it being 'impossible, quite impossible.' I spoke to Parker about it, but he only shrugged his shoulders. I must say that Parker does that too often to my mind; he has greater influence with Mr. Gilderoy than any of the family, and might, I think, use it a little more for good if he chose.'

Of course I could only shrug *my* shoulders, and beg Miniver not to quarrel with any of his new relatives on my account. Lucy expressed an equal sorrow about the matter, though with less of indignation; it was her nature to submit to authority. I saw a good deal of her at the office of the 'Crescent,' where Miniver's frequent visits were no doubt the attraction; his contributions were not only written in collaboration with her, but were often accompanied by illustrations from her pen. Braidwood thought her proceedings rather *infra dig.*, but of course Miniver was the only person to be consulted as to her conduct. We formed a very pleasant little literary triumvirate, in which I played the inconspicuous part of Lepidus. With such companionship as they vouchsafed to bestow on me, however, I was well content, and when they married and went on their honeymoon I missed them immensely. Mr. Gledson gave me a graphic account of the wedding. He corroborated Miniver's view as to the mental condition of Mr. Gilderoy. It seemed strange to him that one whose faculties were so manifestly failing could have the vigour to exhibit such antagonism as he had persistently shown towards myself; but, on the other hand, he thought that Mr. Parker had done his best to mend matters. He described him as a man not only successful in business, but as having considerable literary attainments and not a little romance in his character. He had fallen in love with his wife at first sight at an age when such impetuosity is very unusual; but he appeared to make her an excellent husband, and was a great favourite with all the family—'except, as you know,' said Mr. Gledson, smiling, 'his new brother-in-law. Miniver thinks that if he had put more pressure

on the old gentleman you would not have been excluded from the fold at Lavender Hill.'

I was sorry to hear that there had been any further friction on my account, but soon dismissed the subject from my mind. I should like to have seen more of Mrs. Parker—certainly a most fascinating and gentle creature—but her sisters I should still constantly meet either at their own houses or at Mrs. Argent's. It was a simple forecast of innocent enjoyment—more domestic, perhaps, than most young fellows of my age would have indulged in—but in my experience at Driffell Hall I had had dramatic incident enough to last my lifetime. And yet it was fated that I should again be brought face to face with it, and that in the most unexpected manner.

The Minivers had returned home from their marriage tour some weeks, and I was their most frequent visitor. Our tastes and pursuits were more or less similar, we were unfeignedly attached to one another, and our conversation was of a confidential character. As to my interview with Mr. Driffell my lips of course were sealed, but I had no other secrets from them, while Miniver discussed his wife's relations in her presence with good nature indeed, but with considerable unreserve. They were agreed on most points, and indeed the Gilderoy family—with the exception of its head, about whom little was said, partly from filial respect and partly because the poor gentleman had become, according to Miniver's account, hardly responsible for his actions—were a very nice family, and would stand a good deal of criticism. But Uncle Charles, as they called Mr. Parker, was a subject on which they had different opinions. Lucy admitted that he might have made a better fight for 'dear Mr. Gresham'—he who had once been 'dearest Laurence' was not alluded to—but he had a hard part to play with dear papa, and he really was the kindest soul. Everybody liked Uncle Charles who knew him.

'But nobody does know him,' argued Miniver, laughing; 'he is never seen except at the office or Lavender Hill. Though he is certainly not a young husband.'

'It is lucky Mary does not hear you,' put in Lucy.

'Well, he's fifteen years her senior, if not twenty. There, you *know* it's twenty,' added Miniver, triumphantly, 'or else you'd have said so sharp enough.'

'I am sure he doesn't look so,' said Lucy evasively.

'No, I am bound to say he is very well preserved. But, as I

was about to say, not being a Methuselah, why should he eschew all public entertainments and the haunts of his fellow-creatures? I grant that he can make himself agreeable, and perhaps that is the reason why he shuts himself up like a monk; he is afraid of becoming too cheap, I suppose.'

'You may suppose anything you like, my dear,' said Lucy, 'but you will never persuade me that Uncle Charles is not a very remarkable man. He fell in love with Mary, Mr. Gresham, at first sight, just like a boy, but she has never had any reason to repent of her bargain.'

'And what is Uncle Charles like to look at?' I inquired, 'for you must remember I have never been vouchsafed the opportunity of seeing him.'

'Well, he's about the average height, and rather slim—what you call a very young figure—his hair is brown, just a little tinged with grey, his eyes—'

'My dear Mrs. Miniver,' I exclaimed, laughing, 'your excellent description is quite thrown away upon me. I have never been able to picture to myself what a person really looks like from verbal descriptions, not even those of Sir Walter Scott.'

'Well, I'm sorry,' said Lucy, with a toss of her pretty head, 'that I can't make myself intelligible to you, because there is no portrait of Uncle Charles anywhere, since nothing will induce him even to be photographed.'

'Nevertheless I took a snap-shot at him with my kodak in the garden the other day,' said Miniver, 'and I've got it somewhere.' He opened a drawer in his desk (for we were sitting in his own sanctum, which was the young couple's favourite room). 'Yes, here it is; and as like as peas. What is the matter, Gresham? Are you ill?' exclaimed Miniver.

'I do believe he has seen Uncle Charles before!' cried Lucy. (How I cursed her intelligence!)

'Mrs. Miniver has nearly hit it,' I said, 'though not quite. What made me look so astonished was the likeness of the photograph to a friend of my own, a barrister of the name of Robson.' What had been placed in my hand was a portrait of George Driffell. There was no doubt about it; it was the man, and no other. The figure still young and slim, the hair just tinged with grey, as Lucy had described him. His face was less grave than I had seen it a few weeks ago in the Temple; brighter, indeed, than I had ever seen it (the snap-shot had been taken in the garden,

while, as I was afterwards told, he was playing with the children). Perhaps, as he had asserted that day in Essex Court, he had really never been so happy—deserter, pretender as he was—as in his present position.

I turned the conversation—though doubtless clumsily enough, for this crushing blow had scattered my wits—to other topics, and escaped from the house as soon as I could.

How I reached my lodgings I hardly know, for the news I had just received monopolised every thought. The mystery of Mr. Driffell's disappearance had been revealed, but not explained. It was not till some days afterwards that, in answer to questions put as indifferently as I could, Mrs. Miniver told me how he had met with her sister. He had come up to town from the country to see Mr. Gilderoy upon business, and met her by accident at his office. Within a week he had proposed to her. He had no relations or connections of any kind, and was of independent means. His progress in Mr. Gilderoy's favour was almost as quick as with his daughter, and partnership in both cases soon followed. He showed the most extraordinary aptitude for work, and the business had greatly improved since his joining it. Personal liking joined to this success gave him great influence with the head of the firm, which increased as the health and vigour of the old man failed. So much I learnt from Mrs. Miniver, but she did not tell me, because she did not know, to what an extent the influence eventually grew. It was almost always, it is true, exerted for good; but when the occasion came, as it did come in Laurence's case, for it to be used otherwise, it was put forth to the uttermost. He not only persuaded Mr. Gilderoy to break off his daughter's engagement—upon the specious plea of the insecurity of Laurence's financial position (itself solely owing to his own misconduct)—but induced him to take the whole responsibility on his own shoulders; while pretending to work in his son's favour, and later in my own, Mr. Parker was, in fact, straining every nerve to keep the Gilderoy family from any association with us. A single meeting with me would, of course, have been fatal to him as regarded the disclosure of his identity, and it had all but occurred that afternoon at Mrs. Argent's. Despite all precautions it might still occur any day, a thought which must have been a bitter drop indeed in his cup of domestic happiness. It was certainly a stroke of bad luck for him that his sister-in-law (though an illegal one) should have been the beloved object of his own son.

To me George Driffell himself was as much a mystery as his story itself.

Though I bitterly resented his conduct (and especially when I thought of his gentle deserted wife), I could not forget how kind he had shown himself to me in my boyhood ; how just, and wise, and honourable he had appeared to be ; how incapable of dishonesty or dishonour. It was no explanation, of course, of his conduct, but I recalled to mind the observation made years ago by Dr. Garden : ' What rather alarms me about him is that there are such possibilities in his character.' Even I had noticed a strange mixture in it of determination and impulse, of principle and of imprudence. He had never loved his wife as a wife ought to be loved, and in Mary Gilderoy he had probably met for the first time the woman that seemed suited to him. He had underrated his wife's affection, and I honestly believe was unaware of the misery that his behaviour had brought upon her. The large sum of money he had taken with him for the purpose of buying the patent and machinery had given him the means of putting his sudden and overwhelming impulse into effect. He was doing no material harm to his wife and child by leaving them in possession of the rest of his property. In a few weeks they must needs suppose him to be dead. He would begin life under happier auspices. These, I think, were the reflections that made him enter on so wicked and dishonourable a course of life. But, cruel as it was to his wife, how infinitely more so was it in relation to the girl for whom he felt such a fatal attraction ! How could such conduct be explained in connection with such a character ? A remark of Mr. Dering's which I had heard him make to my old tutor occurred to me : ' We may reasonably doubt the guilt of a man charged with any other offence for the first time ; his " previous record " is his witness. But with regard to his relations with the fair sex character has nothing to do with it ; no, nor age, nor station, nor any other circumstance which might seem to presume his innocence. Unlike drunkards, who " break out " at intervals after previous indulgence, we may break out in this direction at any time, and without the least sign of previous weakness.' I also remembered, with such a sinking of the heart as I had never before experienced, that Mr. Dering had laughed me to scorn when I had expressed my belief that Mr. Driffell was incapable of breaking the law, whereas he was now a bigamist and subject to penal servitude.

It was this consideration, I confess, more than any reflections

upon my former friend's moral misconduct, which now filled me with apprehensions. If his crime—for crime it was, and one of the highest magnitude—should be discovered, it would mean disgrace and ruin to everyone who had been, and still was, connected with him. I trembled at the thought of being the sole possessor of so tremendous a secret. There was no comfort for me in any direction, save the one poor consolation that Laurence had not (as might have been the case) persuaded Lucy to marry him in the teeth of the prohibition (as it was supposed) of her father. That would have been a catastrophe indeed, which, in all probability, would have brought revelation and ruin along with it.

As to ever going down to Luxton and seeing dear Mrs. Driffell and her son again, I felt it was impossible. I could not school myself in their company to behave as I had been wont to do; something in my looks and manner would certainly betray my knowledge—perhaps a guilty knowledge, but with that I in no wise concerned myself—of her husband's disloyalty. I thought this the more because, in my heart of hearts, I believe she already suspected it. Nothing else could explain to me her peculiar conduct under the loss that had befallen her. She still loved him—as much as she dared; that is, she strove to love him in spite of a conviction, founded upon her own shortcomings, that her love was not reciprocated.

With respect to the Gilderoy family, I did not feel the same necessity for breaking off my friendship with them; indeed, my doing so would not have been without its element of danger, since it would have been impossible for them to have explained it in any ordinary fashion. Moreover, now that I knew what had happened, my desire not to meet with Uncle Charles would be as great as was his to avoid me. My calculations upon this matter proved correct. I enjoyed the friendship of the Braidwoods and the Minivers for many years, without being brought face to face with their misguided relative. When Mr. Gilderoy died there was a little difficulty about the matter, since neither Grace nor Lucy, nor even Mary (whom, however, I met but seldom, and always with a most painful sense of the Damocles sword that was hanging over her), could understand why Mr. Parker should any longer object to making my acquaintance; but he boldly stated that, though his father-in-law was no more, he could not, out of regard to his memory, cultivate an intimacy of which he had disapproved, and so highly was he held in respect by the family

that this excuse passed muster, save, it must be admitted, with Miniver, who did not hesitate to express his conviction that 'Uncle Charles' showed himself in this matter a greater humbug than ever. With this exception, Mr. Driffell, once of Driffell Hall, lived in the possession of the good opinion of all the family at Lavender Hill, and died deeply regretted by the woman who never (I am thankful to say) had the shadow of doubt of being other than his lawful wife. Now all have died to whom this story—told, of course, under fictitious names—will have any personal significance. I have since become pretty well known as a novelist; but no fictitious tale I have ever written, and no experience during a long and not uneventful life, has ever approached, for me at least, in its dramatic interest this incident of my early youth. S

THE END.

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